

AMARSINGH COLLEGE



Library

Checked

1976-77

Class No.

F 823

Book No.

11K 23 E

Acc. No.

67201

82

EMBER LANE

Other Books By SHEILA KAYE-SMITH

NOVELS

The Valiant Woman
Rose Deeprose
Gallybird
Superstition Corner
The Ploughman's Progress
Susan Spray
Shepherds in Sackcloth
The Village Doctor
Iron and Smoke
The George and the Crown
The End of the House of Alard
Joanna Godden
Green Apple Harvest
Tamarisk Town
Little England
The Challenge to Sirius
Sussex Gorse
Three Against the World
Isle of Thorns
Spell Land
Starbrace
The Tramping Methodist

BELLES LETTRES

Three Ways Home

VERSE

Saints in Sussex

SHORT STORIES

Selina is Older
The Children's Summer
Joanna Godden Married
Faithful Stranger

No. Al-84
2

EMBER LANE

A Winter's Tale

by

SHEILA, KAYE-SMITH



CASSELL

and Company Limited
London Toronto Melbourne
and Sydney

F823
K 23 E

Acc-No: 6720

12

First Published 1940
Second Edition 1940
Third Edition - 1946

Printed in Great Britain by
Lowe and Brydone Printers Limited, London, N.W.10

CONTENTS

PART I

DONKEY'S SERENADE

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	JESS MARLOTT	3
2	BRENDA LIGHT	19
3	HARRY COBSALE—LUCINDA LIGHT	36
4	HARRY COBSALE	51
5	JESS MARLOTT	61
6	BRENDA LIGHT	73

PART II

SHINING LIGHT

I	LUCINDA LIGHT	95
2	HARRY COBSALE	109
3	JESS MARLOTT	121
4	BRENDA LIGHT	131
5	LUCINDA LIGHT	144

PART III

BURNING LIGHT

I	JESS MARLOTT	163
2	BRENDA LIGHT	180
3	LUCINDA LIGHT	194
4	JOAN COBSALE	209
5	JESS MARLOTT	222
6	BRENDA LIGHT	231

CONTENTS

PART IV

LIGHT IN DARKNESS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I HARRY COBSALE	245
2 LUCINDA LIGHT	261
3 JESS MARLOTT	269
4 LUCINDA LIGHT	282
5 HARRY COBSALE	288
6 BRENDA LIGHT—LUCINDA LIGHT—HARRY COBSALE .	298

PART I

DONKEY'S SERENADE

JESS MARLOTT

IN days gone by the only way from Woodhorn to Potcommon was down Ember Lane as far as Four Legged Crouch and then up the hill past Egypt Farm to what is now the cross-roads by the market place. The road had no doubt been made after the manner of most Sussex roads, by carts and cattle moving from farm to farm. Ancient wheels had dug deep ruts across the marsh from Kent, with a clumsy bridge at Puddledock; then at the foot of the hill they had either turned south-west to the market at Potcommon or south-east to Loats Farm and Woodhorn Street. Sometimes they went due east to Bibleham, and by the end of the seventeenth century so great was the traffic at the cross-roads that an inn was built there, the Chequers, which carried on a comfortable trade for nearly two hundred years.

It was not till the beginning of the nineteenth century that public authority, made anxious by the French wars, brought the village and the market-town at least two miles closer to each other by a turnpike road along the ridge. That road hardened and widened, as the turnpike gave place to macadam and macadam to tarmac and finally the whole surface of shifting, struggling clay was bound down in a strait-jacket of concrete. Ember Lane became a by-way, for the new road had been continued through Potcommon into Kent, avoiding the misty breadth of the Marsh and the old bridge at Puddledock. Only the thinnest traffic of the farms passed through it and soon the Chequers Inn lost its business and had to close.

For a time it was a private house—changing hands frequently, for there was a rumour that it was haunted. Then it became two cottages, sinking from that into a warren of five, and then sinking so far into insanitary disrepair that early in 1934 the Potcommon District Council

issued a demolition order, which had not been carried out by the fall of the year, owing to the failure of the tenants to find any sort of accommodation elsewhere.

Between Chequers Cottage and Woodhorn Street, about a mile away, was only a small strew of houses. Right at the bottom of the hill stood a tarred, one-story building known as Summer Row, where lived one of the three labourers at Loats, a large mixed farm a quarter of a mile higher up the lane and standing some two hundred yards back from it behind the screen of Harbolets Shaw. The pastures of Loats rolled down to the marsh, to march with the pastures of Limbo Farm over some valuable fattening grounds. Hops filled the sheltered pockets in the hill-side towards Bibleham, and on the higher lands were coloured stretches of arable—wheat, oats, pease and roots.

Until a very short time ago Loats had owned all the land between the Iron River and the glebe of Woodhorn Parsonage. But there had been changes in recent years. For one thing, a new Rectory had been built across the lane, opposite the old one, just below the Church—releasing the Rectors of Woodhorn from their slavery to the tyrannical old house where they had lived ever since the Reformation—and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners had defrayed their expenses by selling the Old Parsonage, as it was now called, to strangers from London. They also sold half the glebe to old Albion Cobsale of Loats. But this did not remain long in his possession. He had completed the purchase only just before the first disastrous year of the Hop Marketing Board caught him between the devil of Queen Anne's Bounty and the deep sea of the Inspectors of Inland Revenue—with the further threat of his own death duties when his sons took over the farm. Only just before he died he had sold all his newly acquired acres—together with some fifty more of Loats' immemorial land—for "development" by a local builder.

There had been an immediate outcry, and the better class inhabitants of Woodhorn bore down on the District Council with a clamour of rural amenities and a demand that the Town Planning Act should be set in motion. It had ended in the retired Colonel who owned Casteye Farm—on the main Woodhorn-Potcommon road, but with a frontage

on Ember Lane—losing patience with country bureaucracy and buying the whole view from his back windows. This excluded the small prawn-coloured bungalow which the builder had succeeded meanwhile in putting up in the field immediately above Loats and which he had sold for a thousand pounds to an ex-serviceman who was looking round for a poultry farm.

The ex-serviceman and his wife called the bungalow Honeypools, which was the name of the field in which it stood, and which they thought a charmingly pretty name for a poultry farm—not knowing that it was Sussex for mud puddles.

On a cold evening in October, when the threat of winter seemed to hang in fog round the edges of the sky the ex-serviceman's wife had come out to shut up the chickens for the night. The air felt thick as if it too would soon curdle into fog. Already the chestnut stoles of Casteye Wood across the lane were smeared by something grosser than the dusk and the oast-houses of Loats Farm, at the bottom of the hill, seemed to be standing on a cloud above the marsh, which had entirely disappeared.

Where sight was failing sound had a new weight and sharpness, the barking of a dog far away at Pondtail, the bleating of sheep on the marsh, the passing of a car over the bridge, the rise and fall of a chopper at Casteye Farm, were all as so many blows on the silence. The ex-serviceman's wife listened, straining for a sound she could not hear. She was listening for her husband's car, which had an unmistakable approach, wondering when he would come home and why he was so late—why he was always late.

He seldom came home before six, and yet their sale of eggs and table-birds was no larger than it used to be in times when he was back by four. It was the long distances, he said—driving so far to market and here and there with small orders, taking a dozen eggs five miles to Sokenholes and a boiling fowl three miles in the opposite direction to Maidenbower. It scarcely paid for the petrol . . . and yet he insisted that it was better than paying a co-operative society to do his marketing for him.

She was always anxious when he was late, fearing that an accident had happened. The car was old and subject to engine trouble; and he was a poorish driver. There had been accidents once or twice in the past—nothing serious but enough to make her think how serious it might have been. If only she didn't feel and know he was so helpless . . . perhaps at this moment he was sitting under a hedge, staring at the car and wondering why it wouldn't go . . . or perhaps something worse . . .

The gate clicked; and she suddenly thought he had left the car and walked home. She turned with a sigh of relief to welcome him, but the figure that loomed through the dusk was not his. It was bigger, though a woman's—the big, strapping figure of Mrs. Malpas the Rector's wife, made bigger still by her huge, shaggy tweeds, pearled with mist and giving out a damp, woollen smell.

"Hullo, Mrs. Marlott. I just looked in——"

Jess Marlott sighed again, this time with disappointment, but she also smiled. She was glad to see Mrs. Malpas, who was almost the only soul she knew, and moreover a customer.

"How are you?" she asked, then realized that she must be looking more of a guy than usual, with her old moleskin coat hanging over her gum boots and a scarf tied round her head . . . "I'm afraid I'm in a terrible mess. You must excuse me."

"Oh, no—you look very nice—very workmanlike. I wonder if you could let me have some eggs to take back with me? The fishman's never called and I've nothing for supper."

"Oh, certainly. How many do you want?"

"Half a dozen will do. There's a rabbit for to-morrow and a joint and some sausages for Sunday. How much are they now?"

"The same price—three shillings."

"Isn't it terrible? Though I don't suppose you think so."

Jess smiled wanly.

"No—we like selling them at a profit." Then feeling that she had been rude and possibly also had offended a customer, she added quickly: "You see, the feed costs so much that often when they're cheap we hardly make any profit at all."

"But you have much bigger sales then, don't you?"

"Not always—it depends;" she felt she could not tell the Rector's wife how terribly Greg had miscalculated with those pullets. "Besides," she continued, "often when eggs are scarce the government deliberately brings the prices down by importing foreign ones. I expect we'll be having a lot from New Zealand soon."

"Well, that'll be a mercy. I'm glad the government thinks of our pockets occasionally. And New Zealand isn't foreign, you know, it's the British Empire."

"I'm afraid that doesn't make much difference to us."

It was the other woman's turn to soften what she had said.

"Of course not—it can't; and I'm being very tactless. My husband says I'm the most tactless woman he's ever known. But if you knew what it was like to clothe and feed and educate four children on three hundred and fifty a year . . ."

"It must be a terrible struggle. I can sympathise."

For a moment they were both silent, producer and consumer smiling ruefully at each other. Then the Rector's wife said:

"Don't you find it an awful business shutting up all those fowls every night?"

"Oh, it isn't so bad. They mostly go of their own accord into the arks and I've only got to shut the door. It's a tie, of course."

"Doesn't your husband help you?"

"Certainly—when he's here. But he's so busy now that he's very seldom back in time."

"Oh yes, of course. I'm glad he's busy. . . . Well, I really must be getting home now—if you'll kindly let me have the eggs."

"They're in the lodge. It won't take me a moment to pack them up."

As they walked to the lodge, the Rector's wife said suddenly:

"Your husband's at the Old Parsonage."

"Oh" . . . a tide of comfort and relief broke over Jess's heart and surged in every vein.

"Yes, I saw his car standing in the drive as I came down the road."

"Oh, I'm glad. I'd been wondering . . . I mean, it was getting so late that I was afraid something might have happened."

Mrs. Malpas did not speak for a moment. Then she said:

"I know what it is to worry. I often worry about my husband when he's late. Not that he's often late—in fact he very seldom goes out at all. I have the greatest difficulty in driving him out, away from his books."

"It's only this last month or so that my husband's been late. The car isn't running well and he goes to some very distant markets."

"Do you know Mrs. Light?"

The conversation seemed to be growing rather jerky and Jess could not immediately follow this new turn.

"Mrs. Light?—who is she? . . . Yes, of course, I know . . . at the Old Parsonage. I know her by sight, but I've never spoken to her. We supply her with two dozen eggs a week."

They were in the little lean-to shed where the eggs were sorted and candled. The Rector's wife peered closely at Jess Marlott through the dim light.

"She's a very good-looking woman."

"Yes, isn't she? And the daughter's pretty too, don't you think?"

"Quite pretty. I'm sorry for her, poor child."

"Sorry?—why?"

"Haven't you heard the story?"

"No. All I know is that she's a widow and used to live in London. Will it do if I pack your eggs in this little punnet?—we seem to be out of boxes."

"That will do very well. I suppose you've never heard that her husband died quite suddenly?"

"No. How very sad for her, poor thing."

Mrs. Malpas looked restless.

"I'm afraid it was largely her doing. She drove him to it. He had a weak heart and she'd just asked him to divorce her."

"Oh . . ."

How had Mrs. Malpas heard all this? It was village gossip, she supposed. As if reading her thoughts, the other woman continued:

"Mrs. Hart of the Manor told me. She knows people who used to know the Lights in town. She says it was quite an open scandal—a

literary man, I believe, or someone to do with publishing. But he wasn't the first, by all accounts—only the first her husband found out. Some people are very easily deceived——” She looked hard at Jess Marlott.

“I wonder why she came down here,” said Jess, who was not, however, very much interested.

“I suppose she wanted to hide herself after what she'd done. And she used to come here as a child, you know—to stay with the Derrys. I expect you've heard that old Mr. Derry was the last Rector of Woodhorn to live in the Old Parsonage, and Mrs. Light was a sort of relation of his wife's and apparently stayed with them quite a bit when she was a little girl. She must find things very different now, for of course nobody's called on her.”

“I suppose not.”

“No; Mrs. Hart sent round a warning. But we're different, of course, at the Rectory—my husband's position and all that. Not that I've ever actually called, but we got to know each other over some of her laundry that came to us by mistake. And the daughter's quite a sweet child.”

“How old is she?”

She wished Mrs Malpas would go, for Greg was bound to be home at any moment now; but she still loomed in the doorway.

“She's seventeen, but in some ways she's no older than our children. And yet she's always borrowing my husband's books and talks most intelligently about them too, he says.”

“She must be an unusual sort of girl.”

“It's having been so much with her father. He was a professor of something and a great scholar, and they were inseparable, Mrs. Hart says. I believe she was ill for weeks when he died like that. If I was her mother I'd never forgive myself.”

For some unexplained reason Jess found herself taking this unknown woman's part.

“And yet it's a sign of grace that she asked him to divorce her instead of wanting him to compromise himself and let her bring the petition . . . some women are very mean about that sort of thing.”

"That was to give him the custody of the child. He adored her and would never have consented to part with her. Of course it was honest, up to a point. . . . But it doesn't alter the fact that she's a dangerous woman; and if I were you——"

She stopped and even in the failing light Jess could see her face turn purple above her tweeds.

"If you were me? . . ."

She forced herself to smile pleasantly at this woman who meant to be kind and was a customer.

Mrs. Malpas evidently gave up struggling with herself.

"I've let out such a lot that I may as well tell you the rest. It's only right. You ought to know. Your husband——"

"My husband?" At once a scared look came into Jess's eyes.

"Yes. He goes to see her every evening about this time."

The scared look vanished.

"Does he? I didn't know he knew her, except as a customer."

"Well, he does. He's there at least an hour every evening—sometimes longer."

Jess looked bewildered, then suddenly she nearly laughed. Was Mrs. Malpas trying to tell her that Greg was unfaithful?—that he was flirting with Mrs. Light? The idea was so ridiculous that she could not even feel resentment.

"I only hope he isn't boring her. We know so few people round here that I expect he's glad of a chat."

"Chat . . ." repeated the Rector's wife. Then she mumbled: "I hope you don't mind what I said."

"Oh, no, of course not. It's interesting—about Mrs. Light, I mean."

"Perhaps you and your husband will come and have tea with us some day."

"We should love to—later, when we can shut up the chickens first."

"That will be very nice. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. Thank you so much."

They parted, each thinking the other was a fool.

Jess went back into the field and finished shutting the chicken-houses. All the while she listened for her husband's car and felt surprised when her task was done and still she had not heard it. He certainly was having a very long chat with Mrs. Light, and if she had been at all inclined to jealousy . . . she smiled—really Mrs. Malpas was rather ridiculous. How could anyone who had ever seen Greg imagine . . .? But then of course Mrs. Maipas did not really know him. She had not lived with him twenty years, feeling increasingly more of a mother than a wife, as day by day she realized more deeply his helplessness, his hopefulness, his integrity?

Poor Greg. He had had a hard time since a grateful nation demobilized him with five hundred pounds' gratuity. So had his wife, but somehow she had not felt her own hard time in the same way as she had felt his. They had started their post-war life in a small Midland town where he had bought a motor-business with his gratuity, and almost at once things had begun to go wrong. He had bungled one or two jobs and upset good customers. Of course, strictly speaking, he should never have attempted to run a garage, but she hadn't had the heart to dissuade him, finding him so convinced that garage-keeping was the golden road to wealth and that what he did not know already he would easily learn. They had been obliged to engage a mechanic, whose wages had eaten seriously into their small profits and who had robbed them in various ways as well. Then to crown all, the town had been by-passed by an arterial road and they had lost nearly all their custom. They had been forced to cut their losses and sell.

In those days Greg's Aunt Elizabeth was still alive, and he had been able to persuade her to come to the rescue, all the more easily because she had never approved of the garage idea and took its failure as a personal compliment to herself. She had set him up in a small farm near Shottisham in Suffolk. Greg had been wild to have a farm—reacting from his mechanical struggles to nature, from oil to dung, from grease to grass. She could remember the exquisite happiness of that first night at Middings, the sense of release, of a new start. How delighted they had been with the cool, quiet old house—so different from the flat over the garage—how new again their furniture had

looked against those white walls. She had been as full of hope and contentment as her husband, and they had not done so badly during the first year. But soon the shadows had fallen again—illness (it was at about that time she had had her miscarriage and lost her last hope of a child), falling prices, disappearing markets, failures in feeding and rearing, unexplained deaths among the stock.

Of course Greg had had no real experience of farming and in spite of working hard and reading every book and magazine that could help him, was still at a disadvantage in his dealings with those who had been brought up to the job. If only they could move into another district where the natives were more friendly, less determined to do down and drive out foreigners. . . . They both began to long for Dorset, where she had lived as a girl and where he had visited her before their marriage. It seemed to them there in their exile a county of kindly people, soft air and sweet, healthful lands, so different from their present home among the mists and the salt, sour clay. But they were too deeply involved with circumstances to change. They owed money and they could not hope to sell at a price sufficient to pay off the mortgage that was strangling them.

Then once more Aunt Elizabeth had shown herself their friend—this time by dying. She had left Greg five thousand pounds. They had been able to pay their debts and clear out of Suffolk, and, best of all, to buy a grass-farm near Dorchester, only twelve miles from the place where Jess had been born.

Once again there had been a new beginning, two hearts full of hope and release, furniture looking if not new, at least a little less battered against new-papered walls. Greg was determined to make this new farm, Marklands, a success. He had spent all that was left of his legacy after the purchase on improvements and repairs. He would start in the best circumstances possible, on the top of the world. Jess too had felt convinced that this time all would be well. They had learnt from their failure on the other farm—they would not make the old mistakes again, nor should the former shadows overtake them.

That was in 1924. In 1929 they moved into a smaller farm about six miles inland from Weymouth. Greg had decided that Marklands

was too large for them, and that was why, in spite of all he had spent on it, he had not been able to make it pay. As for Jess those five years had brought to a full conviction what had before been just an uneasy sense of Greg's helplessness. In spite of all his hope and confidence he did not ever really learn his job. Just as after holding his driver's licence for twenty years he still drove his car erratically, so after nearly ten years' experience of farming he still made mistakes and miscalculations. Indeed his hope and confidence were his enemies, making him too sure of himself—not in any bumptious, aggressive way, but innocently as a little boy is sure, when he draws what he thinks is a beautiful picture with a packet of penny chinks. There was often a lump in her throat when she thought of Greg.

When they had been at Castlemadder a couple of years she saw that he too was beginning to feel disquiet—to doubt himself at last. The new, small farm was failing too, threatening to drag them into bankruptcy, as this time there was no Aunt Elizabeth behind them. Also by now they had given up trying to live comfortably. It was years since they had been to the pictures or bought new clothes, and they had long dropped all their small acquaintance for lack of money to spend or time to spare.

"What are we to do next?" he had asked her one evening. "Do you think I could start something that isn't a farm? We don't seem to succeed as well as I'd hoped. What else could we do?"

She had shaken her head, not knowing an answer. They neither of them had any experience beyond that which they had so hardly earned. Before the war he had spent some time in a solicitor's office, but had enlisted before he was qualified. It was too late for that now—besides, there would be fees to pay and then no doubt a partnership to buy, and they had no money. Beyond all this, something secret and uneasy in her told her that Greg in the law would be probably very like Greg on the land—a hopeful failure.

"What about a poultry farm?"

"Well . . ."

"There's no doubt whatever that chicken is what pays best—in fact, as far as this place is concerned, it's the only thing that pays at all.

There's actually a profit on the hens this year—nearly ten pounds, and we haven't got more than a hundred. If we had a thousand . . .”

She saw the hopeful gleam in his eye, but as she didn't speak it soon faded.

“I suppose you think I'd muddle that too . . .”

“Oh, Greg—no, no.”

It was the first time he had spoken of his failure, and it almost broke her heart. Up till then they had accepted, outwardly at least, the convention that everything but his own incapacity was to blame for their misfortunes—prices, markets, taxes, weather, their neighbours and general bad luck. Now for the first time the pretence was off, and she couldn't bear it. She couldn't bear the sight of her little boy staring at his picture and realizing that it was badly drawn.

“My darling, you mustn't blame yourself—there's been such a lot against you.”

“No more than there is against other chaps.”

“Most farmers are doing badly now.”

“Not so badly as I am, and I've had all sorts of advantages they haven't—my gratuity, Aunt Elizabeth's money. . . . Two or three times I've got in on the ground floor, and yet I've failed. It's no good, Jess old girl; let's face the facts—it's me. I make mistakes, and there's not an inch of room for mistakes these days.”

She had seen his face working as he spoke, and to hide the unbearable sight she had taken him in her arms and cried, to let him comfort her. They had both cried a little. Then they had talked about the future again—quite calmly, without either much hope or much despair, her heart murmuring to her secretly all the while that nothing really mattered because they had each other. As long as they could manage a living somehow all would be well. She could always be happy while they were together, even if everything else was gone.

Why didn't he come home? It must be at least an hour since Mrs. Malpas had seen his car at the Parsonage. All he had to do there was to deliver a dozen eggs and a table bird. Really if she had been at all of a jealous or suspicious nature . . . she smiled. Poor old Greg—it required

a considerable effort of the imagination even to think of him straying after another woman. He was the most loyal, devoted, dependent old thing in the world. Life at least had given her that. . . . When, on bad days, she made herself "count her blessings", the first was always a loving and faithful husband. After that she scarcely noticed the shortness of the list.

The clock struck seven. If she hadn't known Greg was at the Old Parsonage she would be frightened. Poor man, he would want his tea . . . unless Mrs. Light had given him some. That was probably what had happened—she had good-naturedly asked him in for a cup of tea. Women of her sort were often extremely good-natured. But the Rector's wife had said his car was there every evening . . . she must have made a mistake—she must have seen some other car . . . perhaps it was some other car that she had seen to-day.

Back tumbled all Jess's old fears. She felt that for the last hour she had been living in a false assurance. Poor Greg must be still on the road, for she could not believe that Mrs. Malpas knew what she was talking about. She began to pace nervously up and down the kitchen—they could not afford a fire in the sitting-room, so they never used it in the cold weather. The kitchen was crowded with furniture much too big for it, furniture that had looked its best in white, spacious rooms. . . . She grew tired of avoiding bulks and angles. . . . Oh, Greg, come home. I miss you, I want you, I'm afraid for you, my love. I don't believe you're at the Old Parsonage. Something must have happened to keep you out so late.

Then she made up her mind to go and see for herself. Five minutes would show her if Mrs. Malpas had been romancing. All she had to do was to run up the lane and look at the car outside the house. Anything was better than waiting here, blundering about with her body and her mind.

She dragged on her coat and gum-boots and went out. The night was now quite thick—the fog made half the darkness. She groped her way down the muddy little path through what she had almost given up hoping might one day be their garden and opened with difficulty the gate that always swelled and stuck in damp weather. It was

certainly a bad night for motoring and she began to have doubts about the car's batteries. Perhaps Greg was stranded somewhere because his lights had failed.

If that had happened only the Lord knew when he would be home again; for their customers were scattered about the country-side, as far away as Bibleham in one direction, as Rushmonden in another. Poor Greg might be anywhere on this dank, obliterated map of the Sussex borders. Really, now that his business was taking him so far from home he ought to sell the eggs through a co-operative society. Up till now he had grudged the ten per cent commission he would have to pay, but this personal marketing must use up more than that amount in petrol. . . . She would speak to him about it when he came home and see if she couldn't persuade him. . . . Perhaps she would be able—after this.

She had so convinced herself that he was either sitting under some hedge beside his unlighted car or plodding along some lane ten miles from home that she was as much startled as relieved to find when she reached the Old Parsonage that it actually was the familiar, shabby old Morris that stood outside the door. Nobody could mistake it because it had the bull-nosed radiator of 1923, and had been painted in two shades of green by Greg himself when they first arrived at Woodhorn. What could he have been doing here all this time?—and all those other times when the Rector's wife had seen the car? The second question seemed to slide over the answer she had begun to give the first and change it into a third: Did he have tea with Mrs. Light every day?

No; it was impossible. He would have told her—he told her everything, even those things he had better have kept to himself. Then what? . . . why? . . . She stood irresolutely in the damp drive, lit faintly from the windows of the house. The Old Rectory was a long low building, set back from the road under drooping beeches. It had probably been built somewhere around 1670, but had undergone a Victorian transformation which had by now acquired a certain beauty of its own. The stuccoed walls were cloudy with creepers and wistaria, which softened the rents made by the big sash windows, while the slate roof had purpled into fusion with the shadows of the trees.

Jess stood fumbling mentally beside the car, which looked scarcely more battered and shabby than she. What should she do now? Go home, of course. She was confused, but at least she knew that Greg was safe, and when she saw him again he would explain everything that seemed so strange and perplexing now. She could not ring the bell and ask for him—that would be an extraordinary thing to do, and might offend Mrs. Light, who was quite a good customer. No, she must go home—she could not understand why she felt reluctant to turn from that lighted house, leaving her husband comfortable and warm inside it.

Then as she moved away from the car she suddenly found herself looking straight into one of the rooms. The curtains were undrawn and through the big Victorian window she could see lamps burning softly; and under one of them sat Greg—the light pouring down on his head and showing up rather mercilessly his rough grey hair and worn, heavy features. He looked almost an old man in that light, though he was only forty-nine. He was leaning forward and talking rather earnestly to a woman who sat with her back to the window—only the top of her sleek, dark head showed over the back of her chair. That was almost certainly Mrs. Light herself. . . . There was a small table between them with drinks on it—not tea. Greg had a whisky and soda . . . poor old man—how he would enjoy that!

But somehow the effect of it all was to make her feel more than ever forlorn. She turned away, and just as she did so she saw Greg smile—the slow, loving, rather fatuous smile that she had never before seen him give anyone but herself. Her heart made a sudden movement and for the first time she felt a qualm. . . . No, no, it was impossible—if she let herself even fear it she was being a bigger fool than Mrs. Malpas. She was imagining things—because she was so tired. She suddenly knew that she was tired—every bone in her body felt broken. She would go home and lie down and rest till Greg came back; then he would tell her everything and she would laugh at herself.

He did not come for half an hour and when he came he walked in rather sheepishly.

"Hullo, dear. I'm sorry I'm so late, but the fog hung me up on the marsh and I thought I should never get home."

She stared at him in bewilderment. Then she felt as if she was going to be sick.

BRENDA LIGHT

BRENDA LIGHT sighed with relief as she heard the hall door shut. He was gone at last, and it had seemed as if he would never go. But she liked him—she could not help liking him. He was so honest, so amiable, and the clear simplicity of his mind was restful to her mind's clouded weariness . . . also he was someone to talk to and a man to flirt with in this desert of Woodhorn. She was sorry for him, too; he seemed pathetically in need of a little beauty and brightness. She knew nothing about his wife and he seldom spoke of her, but she looked a poor, drab creature. If she objected to his spending every evening with another woman she should brighten up herself a bit.

Yes, she liked old Greg—but he stayed too long. After about an hour he began to bore her. She was often feeling bored when he came, but only half as bored as she felt by the time he went. He talked such a lot, about such dull things. . . . She was weary of the story of his wounding at Ypres in 1915, of the school behind the lines where he had taught later on in the War, of the innumerable garages and farms he had struggled with since—and this evening he had been telling her all about the diseases of poultry

Poor old Greg! if it wasn't for the love-light in his eye and the occasional words of love that blundered to his tongue she did not think she could have borne him. And yet she was always glad when he came . . . gladder still when he went? Yes, but she hadn't the heart to send him away. That was the truth of it: she was too lonely to stop his coming, too kind to speed his going; she could not tell him that his coming and his going were both equally welcome.

What time was it? A quarter to eight. If she wanted a bath before dinner she must go upstairs at once. But though she looked at the clock and at the door she made no movement out of her chair. She was

bored, but she was not restless—just lethargic, disinclined for exertion. It was the effect of living in the country. She had felt like this ever since she came to Woodhorn.

Her eyes closed, as if in sympathy with the darkness of this thought—the thought that she was bored to death in the very place where she had expected a new life to begin. It made her sorrowful to realize that she was too much changed to be happy where formerly happiness had been so complete. It was in this very room where she now sat that she had seen the spires of apple-blossom spring up into the blue shadows under the ceiling, seeming to carry her heart with them into a mystery of fulfilment and release. They had risen out of two many-coloured vases on the mantelshelf—where her Chelsea figurines stood now—and below them the tender wood smoke had clouded out into the sunshine that filled the room; the smell of it had also been a part of the appeasement in her soul.

Her sorrow teased itself into a smile. Mystery—fulfilment—appeasement—heart and soul . . . they seemed a high-hatted expression of the delight of a little girl of nine, arriving for the first time to stay with her uncle and aunt in the country. Yet even now she did not think they were out of place. She did not think she had ever been as happy as she had been happy then. No doubt the years had given her memories a bloom—a nimbus, rather. . . . But she was not yet so old that she need feel sentimental about her own childhood; and the fact remained that her memories had not faded, though they were memories only of a single year. They had stayed coloured and alight until this hour.

It was in their light that a year ago she had read the announcement that Woodhorn Parsonage was for sale. She had seen it in *The Times* only a month after Nicky's death, and it had seemed almost a miracle that the old house should be waiting to receive and hide and heal her once again. Until then she had been planning to go abroad—for a while, at least; though she had no inclination to start for Lucinda the tetherless roving that had been her own life at her mother's heels until she met Nicky. But the advertisement had sent her hurrying to her bank manager, to coax and bully him into letting her buy the place.

Three thousand pounds was the sum the Ecclesiastical Commissioners were asking, and the house contained thirteen bedrooms, one bathroom, four reception-rooms, a billiard room and a catacomb of dark, stony "offices". Mrs. Shafto had given notice at once.

Her furniture had not been enough even for the few rooms they had decided to live in (closing the whole of one wing), and by the time she had bought a few more pieces and made the place look fresh with new paint there was no money over for improvements. Mrs. Shafto—who had as usual recanted her notice when it came to the point—was obliged to cook on a huge old kitchen range which made almost every meal an affair of dramatic uncertainty, while the bath water, dependent on the same source, was as erratic in temperature as an English June. There was no electric light; Brenda herself had to fill and trim the lamps, for it seemed impossible to find even a daily girl to help Mrs. Shafto. In winter the place would be cold as a cave, in spite of the sweet, prevailing wood-smoke. She had been told that it would cost more than two hundred pounds to put in central heating.

But it was not only the lack of those comforts she had lived with for the last twenty years that told her she had made a mistake in coming back to Woodhorn. She was disappointed in herself because she realized what a fool she had been to think that the past could be made a bolt-hole from the present. She could not in any real sense return to the place where she had been so happy, because she was no longer the person she remembered then. She was actually coming to Woodhorn for the first time as Brenda Light—Brenda Light who still held in her heart the memories of little Brenda Champion, but otherwise was a different being. Adult, wary, broken, how could she expect to feel again with the heart of a child? She was like the big Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*, sobbing pitifully at the door of the lovely little garden, which she had grown too big to enter. Better have stayed away.

Her memories of those lost days, though numerous and clear, were more of things than of people: wood-smoke, sunshine, apple-blossom, hens scratching in the yard, the bower of a weeping willow tree, a cow with heavy, milky breath, red farms shining far away on the marsh. . . . She could remember huge dark trees that dripped over

Ember Lane and frightened her a little. . . . She could remember services in Woodhorn Church, with music that had been to her then the music of another world—her aunt's playing of the two-manual organ had seemed miraculous and not altogether reassuring . . .

These things were all there still. She could and did have any day her fill of wood-smoke, sunshine, flowers, trees, cows and hens. The red farms on the marsh still shone at her from afar, and Woodhorn Church rang its bells every Sunday to call her to worship. The trouble was that she no longer wanted any of it—not more than as a pleasant background to her real desires. Her desires had changed and her desires had changed her.

She wanted the talk of amusing, intelligent people; she wanted variety and stimulation, the gaiety and interest of a cultured, light-hearted world. She also wanted love and admiration, though when she first arrived at Woodhorn she had thought she was running away from these things. She had not expected the local scene to be so empty nor imagined the gift of solitude apart from a background of at least some free choice of society. It had been a humiliating aggravation of her lot to find herself shunned—at least she guessed that her isolation had been deliberately contrived by the social powers of Woodhorn. Somehow they must have heard about her and Michael Barney . . . these things have a way of following one around. She had been ignored by everybody but the Rector's wife and the egg-man. . . . Which showed, of course, that any society Woodhorn could have mustered would have been hopelessly provincial and unsatisfying. Perhaps she would have found it even less amusing than her own company.

Yes, she had certainly slipped up badly in coming here. She would have been happier abroad, happier in London. But though she acknowledged she had made a mistake, she would do nothing at present to retrieve it. She must live with it at least for a time. She could not afford to leave the Old Parsonage unless she sold it for the money she had spent, and that was most unlikely. It was hard to believe that England contained two people willing to spend three thousand pounds on a house which no amount of money could make really habitable.

Besides, there was Lucinda. Her thoughts seemed always now to end with that consideration, in a way that was new since Nicky's death. The child was happy here. She had returned to something of her old self since they had come. Though Brenda had always thought of her as more her father's daughter than her own, she had to acknowledge that Lucinda rather than herself might have been little lost Brenda Champion, finding in Woodhorn Parsonage the peace and security that her mother had sought in vain. She was never bored by country life and seemed content to know only a few people—the Rectory family and that dull little dolly at Loats Farm . . . Lucinda was happy (whose mother had thought she would never be happy again) and it would be robbing her a second time to take her away. She must not rob Lucinda twice—better live here till she was old, trimming lamps and listening to Greg Marlott . . . Brenda was up, out of her chair at last, pacing to and fro among the shadows and lamplight of the room. Lucinda, Lucinda, Lucinda . . .

There was a tap on the uncurtained window. Her blood seemed to freeze as she saw pressed against the pane a face—long, serious, pale and pure, alight with two dark eyes under lint-white hair—Nicky's face. . . . She gasped. Then her alarm broke up into irritation. She made a sign to the face outside—two faces, for there was one behind the other, and they disappeared.

The next minute her daughter came into the room, followed by a spectacled schoolboy with his arms full of books.

"Hullo, Mummy, did I frighten you?"

Lucinda was nearly four inches taller than her mother—too tall, but with a maypole grace that set off her woolly, autumn-tinted clothes. She had always, thought Brenda thankfully, dressed well.

"Yes, you frightened me very much. Why did you have to be so quaint and elfin? The front door isn't locked, is it?"

"No, it was only seeing you there and you not seeing us. I'm sorry. . . ." Her eyelids drooped in discouragement, just as Nicky's had done if she spoke sharply. "Oh, Humfrey, don't hold those books any longer—put them down on that little table."

"What have you got there?" asked Brenda, feigning interest so as to revive what she had made droop.

"Books about Woodhorn. Mr. Malpas very kindly lent them to me."

Brenda twisted her head to read the lettering on the worn backs.

"*History of the Parishes of Woodhorn and Potcommon, Poems by a Sussex Gentleman, Place Names of the Kent and Sussex Border*—you'll be able to write a guide to the district very soon."

She felt disquieted that Lucinda should want to read this sort of thing.

"They're very interesting. I really am keen on knowing more about this place, Mummy. You've no idea what a lot I've found out already. Have you heard that Ember Lane is haunted?"

"No—by what?"

The schoolboy broke in.

"A highwayman—the ghost of a highwayman called Dickory."

He spoke in a thick, adenoidal voice, his eyes glittering behind his spectacles. Brenda looked at him repulsively.

"And have you ever seen Dickory?" she asked.

"No, but lots of people have—our gardener's father did once."

"What was he like?"

"Oh, like the ghost of a highwayman—in a cocked hat and purple coat, with spade guinea buttons and a black mare."

"He evidently knows what's expected of him. And is the mare's name Black Bess?"

"I don't know," said Humfrey gravely. "That was Dick Turpin's mare, wasn't it?"

Lucinda looked thoughtful.

"There's nothing about him in any of the books—absolutely nothing. I wish I could find out . . . the Guide Book tells you about Moll Kemp."

"And who was Moll Kemp?"

"A servant at the Chequers Inn—Chequers Cottage, you know, Mummy. She was hanged for murdering her baby. There's a place on the marsh called Moll Kemp's Grave."

"How cheery! I really think I've heard enough of the antiquities of Woodhorn."

Humfrey said:

"We've started a club called the Woodhorn Antiquarian Society. I'm the president and Lucinda's the hon. secretary."

"My god!"

"Mummy, you don't mind?" cried Lucinda.

"I don't see why you should become an antiquarian at seventeen. Isn't there a tennis club round here?"

"I can play tennis at the Rectory."

"Oh well . . . do as you like." And why, she thought, should I try to stop you growing up like your father? "I'm going to have a drink," she said. "Lucinda, get the stuff for the cocktails. There's only whisky here."

"May I get some orangeade for Humfrey and me?"

"Certainly, if you'd rather."

"We would rather—at least I would, and I expect Humfrey would too."

"Oh, yes, please."

His eyes were as round as his spectacles at the mention of cocktails. No doubt at Woodhorn Rectory they were still symbols of dissipation.

"Sure you won't join me?" asked Brenda, as she mixed hers a few minutes later. "It's dull as well as dirty to drink alone."

"Oh, no, thanks very much," and Humfrey clutched more tightly his glass of orangeade.

"Nor you, Lucinda?"

"No thanks. I don't really like them, Mummy, so it seems a waste."

Brenda sighed. Orangeade was far too typical of Lucinda—orangeade and folk-lore. . . . And such a pretty girl too, if only she looked more awake. A faint impatience mounted with the alcohol in her mother's blood. Why couldn't Lucinda be like other girls of seventeen, instead of a mixture of young child and elderly scholar? It was being so much with her father, of course. As a tiny girl she had preferred his society. She had grown up to be his companion, walking

with him every day, taking excursions with him into the country—Brenda could see them setting out together with eager, child-like faces and a map of Metroland—going with him to meetings where her youth had shone like a candle.

It seemed to her mother that she had grown more like him since his death; as if the shock of it had beaten his image into her. How he had loved her. . . . How he had loved them both. He had seen them as a pair, as his two daughters rather than as his daughter and his wife. Certainly in years they were closer to each other than to him. He had called them his burning and his shining light; for Brenda's name, he said, had sprung out of a Viking's fire, while Lucinda's was the name of light itself. He himself had chosen it, when she was born on St. Lucy's day—the day of light in darkness.

“Lucy Light! Lucy Light!
Shortest day, longest night . . .”

She could remember Nicky singing that rhyme to Lucinda in her cradle.

Of course the fact that the child had turned to her elderly father rather than to her young mother was largely that mother's own fault. She had not always had time for Lucinda, and often when she and her daughter had been together the burning light had extinguished the shining light as the sun puts out the moon in the same sky. Apart from this, Brenda was never really at ease in Lucinda's company. She felt as if her simplicity was not quite normal, as if it was rooted in something deeper and stranger than mere youth and inexperience. As a little girl she had annoyed her mother and frightened her nurse by appearing sometimes to see into an invisible world—a world which was usually friendly and charming but could also be sinister. Brenda hoped and believed that she had grown out of this tendency—certainly she no longer spoke of it. But she always had an uneasy feeling that Lucinda's big dark eyes could see further than was right or comfortable.

At the moment they were occupied harmlessly enough, gazing into the orange insipidity she was drinking, while she talked in a low voice

to the boy Humfrey. Both their voices were low, and Brenda knew that it was her presence that had hushed them. Lucinda was protecting from her critical ear the banalities of their conversation; and Humfrey whom she had frightened a few minutes ago, was still embarrassed. She knew that she had a demoralizing effect on awkward people.

Just as she finished her drink he stood up, mumbling something about being late for supper. Lucinda bade him what her mother thought was an unnecessarily cordial farewell.

"Darling," said Brenda when he was gone, "I don't think much of the boy friend."

"Oh, Mummy. . . . He isn't so bad. I like him."

"I daresay you do." She spoke sharply, for she was irritated by her daughter's tendency to like impossible people. "I believe you like the whole family."

"Yes, I do—they're nice, and they're quite interesting. At least I think so, though perhaps you wouldn't."

"I suppose Mrs. Malpas hasn't said any more about finding a maid for us?"

"No—at least, she's told me that she can't find anybody. All the girls she knows seem to be in places."

"I believe it's because I don't go to church. She thinks I'm a bad influence."

"Oh, no, she doesn't. I'm sure she really doesn't know of anyone. She's much too kind to leave us like this if she did."

"Kind, is she? I'm not sure. My own opinion is that it's curiosity. She gets a kick out of nosing into our affairs. Besides, she thinks I'm an adventuress—she as good as told me so the other day—and it must be gratifying for a parson's wife to see adventuresses having servant-trouble like ordinary people."

"Oh, Mummy, you're not being fair."

"No, I don't feel fair. I feel spiteful. It's the servant-trouble—I'm not used to it."

"We'll find somebody in time."

"I don't believe we shall. We've been hunting for five months without any result. Either there aren't any free girls in Woodhorn or

they're being kept from us. I never knew that life could be so unspeakably squalid."

Lucinda looked at her anxiously.

"Mummy, you're not tired of being here? You don't want us to go and live somewhere else, do you?"

"Yes, I do. But we shan't, because I can't afford it. There isn't a hope of selling this house—at least not for years. Should you hate to go?"

"Yes, I should. This house . . . I can't describe it, but it feels like a quiet place out of the wind. Directly we arrived here the wind seemed to go down."

Her eyes looked dangerously through her mother's, through her mother's heart, through her life, right back to a little girl who was lost.

An hour later they sat at dinner, opposite each other at the ends of the refectory table. The shadows banked round them like a wall, so that the chilly vastness of the room was lost and they seemed to be shut together into a little cell of lamplight. Brenda watched her daughter peeling an apple.

"Hurry up, child," she said, more abruptly than she meant.

Lucinda looked up with a vague, startled glance—very like Nicky when she had interrupted him at a book.

"I said hurry up. Mrs. Shafto will be cross if we stay here much longer."

"I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. I mean, I *was* thinking."

"What were you thinking about?"

The girl's face changed, became veiled.

"Oh, I dunno . . . all sorts of things."

Brenda knew that she had been thinking of her father.

For a minute or so there was silence between them; then Lucinda said in rather an elaborate voice:

"Mummy, did you know that Aliblasters Farm means 'farm of the bowmen'? I wonder how it came to be called that. It would be interesting to know these things."

How clumsily she dodged, poor child . . . for a moment Brenda

was tempted to break through her defence and force her to talk of Nicky. It was ridiculous that his name should never be mentioned by either of them, when he was so much in their thoughts. And yet . . . and yet. . . . Was she really in a position to engage Lucinda in such a conversation? Didn't their living together in peace depend on their never talking of the dead? It was a remarkable thing that Lucinda had never said a word to her mother either of reproach or of comfort . . . evidently she did not trust herself to speak. Her silence, odd and unnatural in a girl of her age, had closed like a grave on her father's memory. Suddenly Brenda realized that she, just as much as Lucinda, was afraid to force that silence, that grave. In it she might find that more was buried than the man they both loved.

She gulped the remaining dreg of whisky in her glass, and seeing Lucinda's apple still unfinished, poured herself out another tot. How much did the child know? Probably very little. She was not observant and had lived even more remotely than Nicholas from her mother's world. Surely if she had known she would have judged . . . if she had known she would not be sharing her mother's life so amiably, wearing no armour but silence. The young are stern; she would have seen her mother as a murderess . . . Brenda felt cold. She wished that she knew Lucinda better. It was all very well to argue like this in her mind about her, but she was not really sure. In spite of her daughter's mild and dreamy manner she did not know for certain that she was not sitting before her judge.

"That apple was green," said Lucinda, "and I've bolted it, so I'll probably have tummy-ache to-night. But as long as we don't upset Mrs. Shafto—hullo! Was that the door-bell?"

"I believe it was."

They both looked at each other in surprise. Any ringing of the door-bell was an event, and at night it seemed almost portentous—so far had they travelled from the London nights.

"I'll go and open the door," said Lucinda. "I don't suppose Mrs. Shafto will."

She ran off and Brenda wondered if Greg Marlott had come back again. He had never before called twice in a day or called so late,

but no doubt he would be glad to come round at any time. She was beginning to feel ready to see him again. Lucinda always went to bed early and even his dull company would be better than solitude, sitting alone among her thoughts.

She actually felt disappointed when Lucinda's galloping return and excited face told her that whoever the caller was it was not Greg.

"Oh, Mummy, who do you think it is? It's a girl come after the situation—quite a nice-looking girl. It seems almost too good to be true."

"Praise heaven!" cried Brenda, jumping up, her disappointment gone. "I suppose Mrs. Malpas sent her. I've belied that woman after all."

"She didn't say who'd sent her and I didn't ask. I felt all knocked of a heap, as they say. Go in, Mother, and see her at once, or I'll begin to think she wasn't real."

Brenda hurried into the drawing-room, and turning up the lamp—for Lucinda in her excitement had left the room quite dark—found a young woman standing by the fire-place. She was hatless and wore a long loose coat; the firelight played over her and Brenda's first instinctive thought was: She's going to have a baby. She dismissed it at once, however. There was really nothing to go by and Mrs. Malpas would certainly not have sent her round anyone in that condition.

"Good evening," she said in the pleasant voice that had kept Mrs. Shafto with her fifteen years.

"Good evening."

A pair of bold, rather enchanting black eyes looked into hers, out of a small, brown face. The girl was not like the common flock of Woodhorn girls, who were mostly big and fair. She was small, with neat, strong hands and wrists. She smiled and her teeth were snowy white; her hair, too, showed no trace of the village permanent wave, set in rather tumbled tribute to some ruling film-star; it was parted on her forehead and fell shining over her ears into a big lump of plaits and coils hanging on her neck.

"You've come after the situation here, I understand. Did Mrs. Malpas send you?"

"No. Nobody sent me, but I heard there was the job going, so I thought I'd try for it."

Her voice was the local voice, broad and blurred, but with a difference which Brenda could not define.

"What experience have you? What can you do?"

"I can do anything—anything you like."

This sounded promising, even though reserves were beginning to pile up in Brenda's mind, reserves which her past experience brought against her present need.

"What I want," she said, "is someone who can tackle the rough work and odd jobs of the house. I have a very capable cook who can do all the rest if that much is taken off her hands."

"I could do anything—I'm strong," and rolling up her sleeve she displayed a wiry brown arm for inspection. "I can scrub and clean and polish. I'm never tired."

"Have you ever been in service before?" asked Brenda more doubtfully.

"Not what you'd call in service, but I've done a lot of housework—helping people, you know. And I do all the work of the place where me and my mother live."

"Where do you live?"

"At Chequers Cottage—down by the marsh."

"Oh, yes, I remember. . . . That's a big place, isn't it?"

"Big enough, though we haven't got the whole, of course."

"Anyway, it's quite near. What time could you get here in the morning?"

"Any time you like."

"Could you be here by eight?"

"Seven if you like."

This was certainly beginning to sound too good to be true. Brenda's housewifely conscience fought with her desire for unconditional surrender and compelled her to ask the next question:

"And—and what about references?"

"Eh?"

"References—a character. From some former employer, you know."

The girl looked worried for a moment.

"I don't rightly know. You see it's some time. . . ." She hesitated, deep in thought. Then she said: "But I reckon Mr. Harry Cobsale would speak for me."

"Mr. Cobsale of Loats Farm?"

"That's it—but Mr. Harry, not Mr. Richard."

"Doesn't Mrs. Cobsale know you? I'd rather have a wife's reference if I can. You see . . ."

"Mrs. Cobsale wasn't there when I was. He's only just married her."

"Oh. . . ."

Brenda still struggled with herself. She must not lose her head. Obviously this young woman was most unsatisfactory from the professional, registry-office point of view. But to send away a strong and willing worker simply because she had no moral reinforcements seemed more than she could manage at the moment.

"If I engaged you," she asked, "how soon would you be able to start?"

"To-morrow if you like."

No lamps to trim to-morrow, no beds to make, no rooms to dust, no tables to lay and clear—for Mrs. Shafto said she could manage all that if she had the heavy work done for her.

"And what wages are you asking?"

The young woman hesitated, as if fearing to ask too little or too much.

"Would you give me ten bob?"

Damn it all! I'm going to engage her. Ten bob! . . . Mrs. Malpas told me it would have to be a pound.

"Look here," she said, "I'll engage you for a week, anyhow, and then if it works out all right and your—your references are satisfactory, you can stay on. But I'd like you to start to-morrow."

"Very well, I'll come."

"At eight o'clock?"

The girl nodded solemnly as she walked towards the door.

Well, even a week's rest will be a comfort after the last four months;

but of course Mrs. Shafto mustn't know . . . and I hope to goodness that Cobsale man speaks well of her. I'll ask Lucinda which he is.

Then suddenly as the door was closing she remembered a question she had not asked.

"By the way, what's your name?"

"Nan Scallow."

She ran back into the dining-room, where Lucinda was clearing the table.

"I've engaged her. I know I'm a fool, but I just couldn't help it."

"Why are you a fool?"

"Because I don't know a thing about her except that she's strong and willing. Mrs. Malpas didn't send her. She hasn't got a proper reference and she's going to have a baby."

"Oh, Mummy, are you sure?"

"No, I'm not. But when I first came into the room I thought her figure looked odd, and she was wearing one of those long, loose coats which people imagine hide babies . . . I may be wrong, but if I'm right, it accounts for Mrs. Malpas not having sent her—which I was begining to feel sore about."

"Mrs. Malpas would never send anyone without a reference. I wonder who she is and how she heard of us."

"Her name's Nan Scallow, if you can believe it; and she lives in Chequers Cottage at the bottom of the lane. She didn't say how she'd heard of the job."

Lucinda stood with the crumb-scoop in her hand. her forehead clouded with thought.

"Nan Scallow . . . I believe I've heard of her. Yes, I remember Joan Cobsale was talking about her the other day, but I've forgotten what she said."

"She gave one of the Cobsales as her reference—Harry Cobsale. Which is he?"

"Oh, he's the elder brother—the unmarried one."

"How can he give her a reference? It all seems very odd to me; but she says your friend Joan wouldn't know her."

"Old Mrs. Cobsale might."

"Who's she?"

"She's the mother who lives with them."

"I didn't know they had a mother living with them. You've never mentioned her before."

"Well, I don't know her really. She isn't on Joan's side of the family."

She put down the scoop and began to lift the cloth off the table. Brenda took one end of it and they faced each other, folding the hems.

"You're not very lucid, darling. What do you mean about not being on Joan's side? Isn't Mrs. Cobsale her mother-in-law?"

"Yes, but they don't speak to each other, because she doesn't speak to Richard. You see, the family's divided into two halves and one half doesn't speak to the other half. Old Mrs. Cobsale and Harry and Daisy are on one side, and Richard and Joan and Madge on the other."

Their hands touched as they came together, folding the middle seam.

"My dear," said Brenda, "you have some odd acquaintance. Why don't they speak to one another? Is it because of Joan?"

"Oh, no. It started long before she married Richard. I believe it had something to do with the farm and old Mr. Cobsale having left it to both the boys."

"They must find it difficult to run the farm together if they're not on speaking terms."

"They manage all right. They send messages or get someone else to do the talking."

"Oh well . . ." Brenda shrugged her shoulders as she put away the table-cloth. "Never mind the Cobsales—no doubt they live as it suits them. But I'd like to have that girl's reference all the same. Shall I write to Harry Cobsale?"

"You might—or I could ask him about her when I go down there to-morrow. Mrs. Shafto wants me to go there early, as she's forgotten to order any cream for the week-end."

"Has she, the old devil? I wonder how she'll like Nan Scallow."

"She won't like the baby."

"For God's sake don't breathe a word about that baby. It's only an idea that came into my head for a moment. I don't really believe there is one."

"I hope there isn't—for if there is, she won't be able to stay with us long."

"If she stays only a couple of months, it'll be something. All I want is a rest. In fact, now I come to think of it, you needn't bother Harry Cobsale for a reference; he won't know anything useful and I'll soon find out if she can do her job. It isn't as if I really minded whether she's respectable or not. We've nothing in the house worth stealing, and as we know nobody in Woodhorn except the Malpases I can't see that it's anybody's business if our daily help turns out to be the village tart."

"It would be Mrs. Shafto's business all right."

"I daresay . . . but we needn't worry till it is."

She really felt ridiculously light-hearted.

III

HARRY COBSALE—LUCINDA LIGHT

LOATS FARM stood just beyond the curve of Ember Lane, where it dipped towards the marsh through the shadows of Harbolets Shaw. The farm drive ran through the Shaw from an oaken gate which had not been shut for so long that brambles and bryony grew over it, choking it back against the sapling stoles. There was another gate beyond the Shaw, which could be shut against stock, and out there you were in a meadow as broad as a down, the land falling gently towards sheltered hop-gardens.

The farm itself as seen from the marsh looked rather like a village, a street of houses running along the hill-side towards the black Victorian oast-house that might have been a steeple. The range of out-buildings was enormous, and the place's history. There was a huge Elizabethan tithe-barn, beamed like a forest; there was an oak-ribbed seventeenth-century cottage, now used as a cake-house. There were two eighteenth-century oasts, their roundels engulfed in the roof of their lodge, so that they looked like white-capped heads rising out of broad, humping shoulders. There was a modern hay-barn with a galvanized iron roof, which the sea-winds blowing up the marsh had tarnished with the sea's colours. The nineteenth-century oast towered above the rest, dominating all times, all styles—thatch, tile, slate, shingle and corrugated iron.

The dwelling-house too was a patch-work affair of brick, tile and Caen stone, all weathered over with a sea-born, lichenous yellow, through which the red glowed faint and rosy like a flame. At one end stood a high, three-storied gable. This was the oldest part of the building, and with its dark windows, the topmost of which was set crookedly high in the point, had a blind malignant look, totally at

variance with the rest of the house, which was in the main, in spite of its age, as wholesome as a pippin.

In the old days Loats Farm had employed twenty men. At the present time it employed only three. None of them slept on the premises now—in either of the great garrets that ran across the roof and once had sheltered the unmarried hands, while the married ones occupied the old cottage in the yard or the black wooden row by the lane-side.

At present old Chodd, the eldest of the men and an experienced carter and cowman, lodged in Summer Row. He was always at his work by half-past five in summer and six in winter. The other two were married, and for want of suitable accommodation near the farm lived a couple of miles away in Woodhorn Street. They were younger men and nobody expected them to be on the job before seven.

The seven o'clock light of a cloudy, windless day was falling in a pale shaft through the hay-door of the barn as Chodd came in to speak to Harry Cobsale.

"Marnun, Maas' Harry. Maas' Richard asked me to say as you äunt to disremember the lorry coming to täake the tegs up to the hill."

"Right you are, Chodd. Tell him I suppose he knows he's sending 'em up too early."

"Backreed's all for their going now, Maas' Harry. There's unaccountable little grass left on the Sweetwillow lands. I know it's full early, but look at the drythe we've had."

"I'll speak to Backreed when he comes. He ought to be here now. There's no harm in sending one lorry-load to Waxend, but we might keep the lot for Idolsfold a bit longer. Even if the grass is on the thin side there'll be fewer grazing it, and we'll save something like five pounds."

"You never used to be the säaving one, Maas' Harry."

"No, and I'm not now. It's only if there's five pounds about I'd sooner it went into my pocket than into Chaffield's or Strudgate's. It wasn't my father's way to pay money to the hill farmers as long as he was able to feed his own sheep. But now we've always got to be

paying out money to all the butcher-graziers of the neighbourhood, just because they're on the District Council and wear plus-fours and put their carters into chauffeurs' caps to drive their saloon cars, so that we're proud to marry their daughters."

"Maas' Harry, you shouldn't ought to say that."

"I've said it, though, and I'll go on saying it."

"I'm sorry, fur your father's säake."

"My father would never have stood for all this running in with the butchers. He was like me—he wanted to respect himself."

"I only wish you wur lik that, Maas' Harry."

His master's face lifted sharply into the grey light.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean as—well, I reckon you know what I mean. It äaun't fur me to say. . . ." His voice died into a thick, low rumbling.

Harry said:

"I don't know, and I don't want to know, so you can stop muttering and clear out. And, listen: you can tell Maas' Richard he can go to hell in his blasted lorry with the Waxend tegs. Half the flock is mine and I'll keep it back to send to Idolsfold next month. You tell him that."

Chodd went out, still mumbling to himself. Harry caught the words:

"You'd bin prouder, you'd bin free-er. . . ."

He had been mending a piece of harness, but he threw it down. He was too angry for the patience required. He lit a cigarette and leaned against one of the great oaken posts that soared into the shadows where it spread like a forest tree. But his eyes were on the floor of the barn.

"Breakfast is ready."

Ten minutes must have passed, for his cigarette was a mere stump which he ground out on the floor.

He turned his head to see in the doorway a small, slight girl, wearing a gaily patterned overall. She stood with one hand on the doorpost and the light behind her made a fret of her cloudy hair. She was

smiling tenderly till she saw his face, when her smile was suddenly nipped like a frosted bud.

"I beg your pardon. I thought you were Richard."

Harry's smile had come as hers vanished; a broad grin across his blunt-featured face, with a teasing light in the eyes above it.

"Never mind if I'm not. You don't have to play that game too. Why is breakfast so early?"

"The lorry . . ." she began, then broke off and walked away.

"That's a good girl!" he shouted after her.

The click of her shoes sounded on the paving of the yard. He watched her small, coloured figure grow smaller and dimmer . . . then suddenly he was out in the yard too, beside her, big and stooping over her.

"This is damned nonsense," he said. "You haven't married a family quarrel."

Still she would not speak pursing her gay little mouth into grimness.

"Oh, well, of course, if you don't stand by Richard he's got nobody but poor old Madge. I suppose you've got to be on his side since he's your husband."

He turned away from her with a swagger and heave of his shoulders, as she reached the door. He was angry because he could not make her speak to him. Yet why should he care? She was only old Chaffield's daughter. She came of that dirty lot he hated. Why should he want her to speak to him? He didn't. From this time forward he wouldn't so much as look at her. He'd go in now and show her how he meant to treat her.

Viciously wiping the mud off his boots on the door-broom he followed her—ten yards in arrear—through the white-washed ramble of Loats' back passages into the big kitchen dining-room where the family still had their meals. There was an outer kitchen where the cooking was done, and his mother was busy there, dishing up the breakfast with the help of her fat daughter Daisy, the only daughter with whom she was on speaking terms. Madge, his other sister, already sat at the breakfast-table, talking to his brother's wife. Neither took the slightest notice of Harry when he came in.

"I don't know where Richard is," said Joan.

"I think he went to the Morgay field; but he knows breakfast's early—I reminded him before he went out."

"That's all right, then. I shan't go after him. . . . What are you doing this morning? It'll be an extra long one with breakfast at half-past seven."

"I thought of taking the 'bus into Marlingate. Like to come too? We could have lunch at Hozier's and go to a picture afterwards."

Harry opened the morning paper, which, fortunately for the amenities of Loats Farm, was delivered early, and made all the noise he could as he turned the pages in quest of the sporting news.

"Yes, I'd like to," said Joan. "Richard will be out all day. He told me he was going to Rushmonden market when he comes back from Waxend. What's on at the Plaza?"

"There's a picture—I forget the name—but rather high class, with French actors. Hullo, Dick! Here you are at last. Considering we're having breakfast early on purpose to suit you . . ."

"Well, it doesn't look like being ready."

Richard, who was a shorter, darker version of Harry, sat down by the window and glared at his brother's newspaper.

"Anyone know what's in the paper this morning?" he asked the women.

They shook their heads.

"We ought to have two, for both sides of the family," tittered Joan, then suddenly met Harry's eye over the top of the sporting page in a glance that disconcerted them both. He had not meant to look at her, but her funny little voice had tickled him and he had forgotten his intention to be as mean to her as possible. She must have forgotten something too, or she would not have spoken so lightly on a serious subject.

"It's a rotten paper anyway," said Richard in a tone which might have meant that he had seen the glance or merely that his wife's remark had irritated him. "Nothing but racing and sport—I like a paper with news in it. I think I shall order *The Times*."

Harry felt at a disadvantage, having no one in the room to whom

he could speak. He wanted to point out that *The Times* cost twopence, but before his mother came in with a battery of poached eggs on a great flat dish, the conversation had strayed from newspapers back to the girls' expedition to Marlingate.

"Good morning, Mother."

Anything to get one's tongue loose.

"Good morning, dear. Here's your breakfast. Daisy, hurry up with the tea-pot. They're getting impatient."

This was not meant for Harry, who still lounged behind his newspaper; but apart from the actual words there was nothing in her demeanour to show that she was even aware of the presence of the other three. It is true that she put eggs on their plates when they were seated at table, and cut three slices off the loaf beyond those required for herself, Harry and Daisy, but her large, light grey eyes seemed blind to the presence of her other son and daughter or of her daughter-in-law, even when she gazed most intently at them.

It was now several months since the family, after about a year's noisy wrangling, had split into two silent halves. The captains of both sides were the two brothers, who had never been good friends and had been set at positive enmity by their father's bequest of the farm. Harry was the elder and till old Cobsale's death had taken for granted that he was also the heir—when his father died Richard would probably clear out to some place of his own. But possibly influenced by the financial plight of agriculture, which ruled out any question of ready money, possibly by other considerations less favourable to his elder son, the old man had left his place to the two of them jointly; and they had quarrelled ever since. It was a clash of dispositions, of individual unlikenesses embedded in a strong family likeness, which had expressed itself in conflicting views on every aspect of farming and had benefited the farm as little as it had benefited the family.

It had not, however, frozen into silence till a few months ago, just before Richard brought home his wife. He had brought her almost without warning, not telling even his supporting sister Madge of his plans till they were mature. She was the daughter of Chaffield of Waxend, a grazier with whom Richard had had dealings disapproved

of by his brother. She was his youngest daughter, youngest of six, or he would probably have objected to her marrying into a family like the Cobsales. They came of good yeoman stock, and old Albion Cobsale had been much respected in his day; but their quarrels were a parish scandal, and Harry was known to be paying eight shillings weekly on an affiliation order from a girl at Polthooks.

Richard had brought his bride to Loats after a week-end honeymoon at Brighton, throwing her into the enmity and silence almost as casually as he would have thrown a stone into a pond. Daisy said at once that he had done it to make the numbers even, so that they should be equally matched, three against three. But no doubt sometimes, especially at first, she had played her part rather badly, forgetting or else ignoring the fact that not only must she never speak but she must never smile. Her smiles had broken on a wall of blankness, spiked here and there with a wink, as her brother-in-law displayed his enjoyment of the new situation. Soon this reception had combined with her loyalty to Richard in giving her as stout a front as any of the other combatants.

Mrs. Cobsale had always completely ignored her existence. She had come prepared to do her share of the cooking and cleaning, to forget the more genteel ways at Waxend, where they had kept a little maid running to and fro. But on the day of her arrival she had found a silent mother-in-law in the kitchen, unwilling to hand over a single spoon. Madge was glad enough of her help in the dairy, but Daisy refused to have her in the chicken yard.

After a time she grew accustomed to this new way of living. She loved her husband and for his sake she loved as much as she could his sister Madge; though secretly she was thankful to have made at least one friend outside the house, in the girl at the Old Parsonage. She was able to play her daily part without breaking the rules of enmity, though now and then she had her lapses, as she had had this morning.

Seated at the breakfast-table she was careful not to meet Harry's eye. He was directly opposite her, which made things difficult, but she copied the family technique and ate her breakfast and talked to Madge and Richard as if he did not exist. He on his side was holding rather a

noisy conversation with Daisy and his mother. The room was full of the sound of talk, and seen by an outsider there was nothing in this table of talking people to suggest a quarrel. It might have been any farm-house breakfast—indeed, the noise and occasional laughter suggested an exceptionally cheerful and united family. Faces were animated, knives and forks clattered, tongues wagged.

So Lucinda thought, as she passed the window on the way to the back door. If she had not known she would never have guessed. . . . She wished she did not know. Knowing and then looking in at that window was like looking up at the blank gable-end of Loats, which she could never see without something cold creeping down her spine.

She had been to the front door, but no one had heard her ring; either they were making too much noise or the bell was broken. So she had gone round to the back, and at first even there they did not seem to hear. She was just going to knock again when footsteps sounded in the passage and the next moment the door was flung open and Harry Cobsale nearly ran into her.

"Hullo!—Oh, I beg your pardon. I didn't know you were there."

"I'm sorry. I knocked, but I suppose nobody heard."

"Don't *you* be sorry. . . ."

He looked down at her approvingly, as she stood before him in her scarlet cap and sweater, against which her hair was silver and gold. He did not think he had ever seen such fair hair—not natural, that is, though there was a girl in a fruiterer's shop in Marlingate whose hair seemed pretty much the same till you looked close at it and saw that it was dead and not living as this girl's was.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked.

"I've come for some cream. Our cook forgot it when she gave the order yesterday. Is it too late for me to have six-pennyworth?"

"I'm sure it isn't. I'll ask my sister. Hi! Daisy!" he called back into the house, "Miss Light has come for six-pennyworth of cream."

Daisy had no concern with the dairy, but he knew that Madge would hear and attend to the business.

"Would you come inside and wait?" he asked politely.

"Oh, thank you. . . . Perhaps I could talk to Joan?"

"I'll let her know. Come in, do, and take a seat."

He led the way past the kitchen into the little-used sitting-room, very tidy, stuffy and cold. Just as he was leaving her there, to summon Joan by a variation of the same technique he had used to summon Madge, she suddenly remembered something.

"Oh, Mr. Cobsale . . ."

He paused, smiling in the doorway.

"It's only that I wanted to ask you—Mother says it doesn't really matter, but I may as well ask as you're here. Can you tell me anything about a girl called Nan Scallow?"

The change in his face made her think once more of the dark gable. The smile vanished, the eyes turned secret, and then something looked out of them that gave her a definite qualm.

"Why do you want——" He broke off, then started again: "What do you want to know about her?"

"Well, she wants to come to Mother as daily help. We're looking for one, you know."

"And she's offered? . . . Good Lord!" He threw back his head and laughed nosily. "I wonder she dared."

"Oh, dear. Then you don't think much of her? But she seemed quite sure you'd give her a reference."

"The——" Once again he broke off. "Did she really say I'd speak for her?"

"Yes, she did. We thought it rather queer that she should have given your name and not Mrs. Cobsale's."

"My mother doesn't know her at all. She's done some hop-tying for me, but she's never worked indoors."

"I suppose she could do indoor work, though—scrubbing and cleaning? That's what we want most."

"Oh, yes, I reckon she could do that."

"And is she quite honest and—— Oh, you know all the questions people ask?"

Harry was silent a moment, and she thought he looked surly.

"I don't know nothing about her," he said, his speech falling back

from its middle way of rather broad, uncultivated English into the drawling negatives of the Sussex-born. "All she did for me was a bit of hop-tying and she did that well enough for a diddicoy."

"Diddicoy? What's that?"

"Gippo—gipsy. Leastways, she's that on her mother's side."

"Oh. . . ."

Lucinda felt uneasy. He obviously did not like being asked about Nan Scallow, and she did not find his answers reassuring. It would have been better, perhaps, not to have questioned him, especially as her mother had said she did not really want to know. But it had seemed such a good opportunity—running into him like that. . . . She decided not to tell her mother anything about it. It would only upset her and it might be all for nothing. He might dislike the girl—for he obviously disliked her—for reasons that had nothing to do with her suitability as a daily help. Better say no more.

Harry seemed equally anxious to be rid of the conversation.

"I'll go and see about that cream."

"Thank you very much. And if Joan's about, do let her know I'm here."

He hurried away and at once she felt more comfortable. While he was there she had felt his secret thoughts touching her closely. She did not know what those thoughts were, but she could feel them rubbing against hers, dark and bruising. . . . She shivered and turned to the window, which was full of a breaking light, as the pale ball of the October sun came rolling out of the clouds in the south-east. The next minute she heard the sound of cheerful voices coming down the passage towards the room.

It was more than an hour before she started homewards, carrying carefully her little jug of cream. She had spent most of the time with Joan, watching Richard and Backreed the looker coax six dozen scrambling, bumping tegs into the tiers of a lorry which was to take them inland to their winter pastures. Harry had not been there, and she had felt herself in quite a different atmosphere. Richard did not give her the same uncomfortable feelings as his brother. She was not sure

that she entirely liked him—certainly she did not like him as much as she liked Joan—but there was nothing about him to make her feel uneasy, none of that pushing at her heart. Besides, all the time she was with him and Joan she could feel their love moving round her like a warm tide, with their secret laughter and private jokes like occasional gleams of sunlight on the water. Every time their eyes met, the sun seemed to come out.

She walked fast, leaning her body a little forward into the wind that blew the dead leaves down the hill to dance round her feet. Every now and then she smiled and sometimes her steps quickened almost into a run, then slackened again. It was her thoughts that ruled her pace, now urging, now releasing her, and her smile expressed their essential happiness. Her mind was at play and in play creating a world of its own—people, places, things, all seemed to take substance at the fiat of her imagination. Her memory was an abyss, without form, but giving her the material for the shapes she created. It seemed all light, as she walked up the hill over the shadows of Harbolets Shaw sun-cast on the lane; her memory was once more an abyss of light. It was only when she was with people like Harry Cobsale that she became aware that there was also a darkness within her.

She stopped when she reached the end of the Shaw.

“Let me see,” she said, talking to herself very gently, “it was here—just by the hedge of the next field.”

She walked slowly for another thirty yards, till she came to the stump of an old tree from which the beautiful Giant Tuft fungus was sprouting its golden shelves. She nodded as she recognized it and then carefully set down her cream jug in a mossy place, where there was no danger of its being spilt. Having done so she climbed the bank and, stooping peered between the bare twigs of the hedgerow.

She was looking southward towards the marsh, and in the immediate foreground the oast-houses of Loats—the two old kilns and the Victorian steeple—rose above the curve of the meadow. Lower down and further away, she could see Chequers Cottage with the four roads springing from it; while out on the marsh beyond stood Limbo Farm, a huddle of black, tarred walls and golden roofs of lichened slate. The

river wound past it to Puddledock Bridge, and close to the bridge she could see the old Ironlatch house, as it was called, now empty and ruinous, but used as a storing-place for ordnance in the days when Sussex was a country of furnaces and forges and the hammers thumped night and day at Cryalls and Furnacefield. Far away, on the other side of the marsh, the county of Kent rose under a patchwork of meadows and chestnut plantations, with the pale string of the Kent road twisting up to Rushmonden on the top of the hill.

Lucinda watched it all and wondered. Was she looking through the right place in the hedge? Ought she to move to some other part of it or were these the twigs that had framed her earlier view? She hesitated, and then just as she was about to move she saw that something was happening. The landscape was growing misty . . . farms, roads and hedges were fading, were disappearing. . . . For a moment she stared into a void, feeling giddy and sick.

Then suddenly the darkness cleared and she sighed with comfort. There it was in all its beauty and strangeness—the Old Country, the country that had been there more than a hundred years ago, the country that her mind had seen so many times in books, but her eyes only once before, through the twigs of this same hedge.

At first it was all flat, as if painted on a backcloth; but almost at once it seemed to adapt itself to her eyesight and become stereoscopic. There was nothing except the actual changes in the view to show her that she was no longer looking across the marsh out of October, 1934. These changes were the same as those she had noticed the first time. Now as then she saw that the Kentish hill-side was wilder, that there were fewer enclosures and that the chestnut woods had disappeared, their purple softness giving place to hard scrubs of oak and thorn. Many of the houses were gone too, and Rushmonden seemed shrunken on its hill; the road to it had darkened and wound hedgeless through rough, common pastures.

The marsh itself looked much the same, except that eastward she could actually see the sea coming round the slope of Mispies Hill, scarcely a mile from Bibleham. A great estuary seemed to open out there, and the river was wider all along its course, filling the whole

span of Puddledock Bridge. The Ironlatch house looked almost new, with sharp outlines and bright colours; while Limbo Farm was no longer black and tarred, but showed a timber and plaster front not unlike the front of Chequers Cottage, with thatch on all the barns. Thatch seemed more common throughout the country-side and she could see haystacks and strawstacks everywhere; and there were at least three windmills—one on the hill-top at Rushmonden, one at Mispies and one at Idolsfold.

It was all as she had seen it that earlier time, except that now, in the nearer landscape, she seemed to detect a difference. She looked intently. Yes, she was right; she was sure that she could see people moving by Chequers Cottage—the Chequers Inn, as it was now, with a startling air of trimness about its straight frontage and uncreeped roof-line. In her first landscape there had been neither movement nor human life, but this time two blue, boat-shaped wagons had drawn up in front of the inn, and carters were standing about in long smocks and small round hats, rather like toy figures in a Noah's Ark. It was all very small and had suddenly gone far away—she felt as if she were looking through the wrong end of a telescope—but she could see every detail distinctly, as if it were on a coloured page in *Memories of a Sussex Village*. She studied the picture intently, for she had no idea how long it would remain. Last time the vision had gone very quickly and now she had a feeling that the page would soon be turned.

She also began to feel frightened. She had not felt frightened before; but now a cold uneasiness that was partly physical took possession of her mind and body. She wanted to move away, yet felt unable and moreover, it seemed, unwilling. There was an absolute silence in her world; not a bird sang, not a beast lowed, not a cock crew on all these farms, and the wagon wheels moved over the ruts without a sound. The name she heard, then, was not spoken from outside her thoughts; yet it came clearly—a name she already knew. Dickory. . . . It was the name of the highwayman that Humfrey Malpas had been telling her about last night. Perhaps he was down there at the inn—she remembered Humfrey saying that he used to make it his headquarters; and now she thought she saw a horseman . . .

The vision was fading and at the same time approaching; she was no longer looking through the wrong end of the telescope but at large objects much too close to be clear. There was a face close to hers: her flesh crept and she could have screamed, but the universal silence held her. The next moment the face lost its cloudy outline and became solid, moulded, coloured—in fact alive. She was looking through the hedge into the face of a young man—a clumsy, rough young man, with straw-coloured hair and a straw-coloured beard on his weathered cheeks. For an instant she thought her dream was over and that some hedge worker was staring at her in well-founded amazement; but at once her eyes corrected her. She could see behind him the oast-houses of Loats Farm rising over the hill—and there were only two; the big Victorian oast was still out of existence. Moreover, though his face seemed in many ways the normal yokel face of the district, in other ways it was different—shaggier, wilder, more animal. It looked to her the face of a hunted man. The blue eyes were full of terror and a queer bewilderment, and the gaze they fixed on her was so beseeching that she felt her own eyes fill with tears.

She immediately said to herself: This can't be Dickory. She remembered all that Humfrey had told her about Dickory's black mare, his purple coat with spade-guinea buttons, his cocked hat and powdered wig. Yet she felt within herself the conviction that he was Dickory—as sure and as reasonable as the conviction that she was Lucinda Light. The next moment she heard herself calling his name, though it may not have been with her voice.

"Dickory!"

His expression changed; his mouth opened as if to speak. Then suddenly his features began to blur and fade.

"Dickory!" she cried, "Dickory!" feeling that at all costs she must make him stay and hear her.

But she was looking at what seemed to be her own face, as if cast by a magic lantern on a flat, white screen—a page—a picture-book. . . . It was gone, and the birds sang round her, the smell of wet earth and grass rose from her feet; while above the hill-top Loats' three oast-houses looked at her out of a day restored.

She turned thoughtfully from the hedge and climbed down into the lane, lifting her cream-jug out of its mossy bowl. She felt a little shaken, in need of comfort, but she told herself firmly that she must not mind the way these things sometimes happened. If they were to happen at all—and she liked them to happen—you could not expect them to be always shining and pleasant, nor could you expect always to understand them . . .

Dickory . . . had she really seen Dickory? She felt almost sure that she had, and yet he was not at all like the highwayman Humfrey had been yarning about. He had looked more like a farm-hand. What had made her think—made her know—he was Dickory? Her father had once told her that the things she “saw” were a kind of hallucination, a visual projection of things she had heard and read. If that was so, how was it that she had seen Dickory like this? There was nothing that she had heard about him or that she had ever read about highwaymen to make her see this clumsy, frightened, baffled creature. She could not remember what he had been wearing, but it was certainly not a purple coat or a powdered wig. He was not Humfrey’s Dickory at all. Did that make him more “real”? Or was he only a dream, such as she had sometimes had when she was half awake? Could she possibly have fallen asleep while she stood there at the hedge?

If only Daddy was here to help her understand. . . . Oh, Daddy, Daddy, I don’t know how long I can go on like this without you. . . . Her throat suddenly filled with sobs, and she put down the cream-jug again for fear that she should spill it.

In a very short time she had recovered herself and dusted her face with powder from a little compact—her mother must not see her red eyes. You could not let Mummy know how dreadfully you missed Daddy, because she might try to comfort you, and that—because of the things you knew—might make you hate her. . . . So it was better if she thought you grim and unnatural; not knowing . . . not knowing. . . .

HARRY COBSALE

IF ever a house looked condemned to death, it was Chequers Cottage. It bore its sentence on its sagging front, which leaned over the road at an angle almost perilous; in its broken weatherboarding from which every scrap of paint had vanished years ago; in its chimney that tottered nearly ten degrees out of the straight and was swollen into shapelessness by a vast, tangled growth of ivy; in its roof which sank into hollows between the beams and in its windows, many of which were broken and some completely boarded up. At least three rooms at the back were unsafe and unoccupied, while two more were occupied in the daytime only—the old couple who rented them taking refuge at night in the slightly less dangerous abode of a married daughter who lived in Summer Row.

All of the tenants were supposed to be looking for other accommodation, but they were slow to find it, partly for the reason that they did not try very hard. There were three sets of them—the Naldreds, the Norrups and the Scallows—and for many reasons, none too clear, they were all rather fond of Chequers Cottage and disliked the thought of leaving it. Some of them, too, were the kind of people who would rather live rent-free in a condemned cottage than in a brand-new Council House at seven-and-six a week.

The cottage seemed full of them that morning as Harry Cobsdale walked down the hill towards it. It was Saturday, so the children were not at school, and the wild piece of ground at the back—where the clothes lines flew their banners three days a week, as Mrs. Norrup's wash succeeded Mrs. Naldred's, and Mrs. Scallow's succeeded Mrs. Norrup's—was now given over to an indefinite number, whooping and rolling about on the grass.

Harry took no notice of them, though one or two of the bigger boys shouted at him rather rudely. He walked past the front door of the cottage—above which, on the leaning wall, the remains of a painted chequer-board spoke feebly of lost honours and thrivings—till he came to a wooden stair outside the house, mounting to a door on the second story. The stair looked insecure and the bottom step was missing; Harry seemed to shake the house as he walked up it and beat on the door.

It opened only just before he was about to knock again and an old woman appeared wrapped from head to foot in a dirty blanket.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" she said. "We haven't seen you for a long time, gentleman dear."

By the way she stood, clutching the blanket round her, Harry knew that she was naked and had only just got out of bed.

"I want to see Nan," he said abruptly.

"You can't see her. She isn't here."

She did not speak in the common voice of the country-side. Her voice had a whine in it, creeping in its softness, and both the softness and the whine were tough.

"Let me in," said Harry.

"I tell you she isn't here."

"But I'm not going to stand outside. I want a word with you, Mis' Scallow."

The old woman hesitated and mumbled something about the place not being fit to be seen.

"Then it's the same as I've always seen it," said Harry, pushing past her.

The attic in which he found himself was certainly not attractive nor even reassuring. The roof fell round the window, almost to the floor, displaying dusty battens and one or two beams hung with dark tattered veils of cobweb. There was a great deal of furniture in much disorder and the remains of a meal on the table, including two bottles of beer. Harry strode across to a second door and looked into the adjoining room, which was larger and better furnished, with a huge brass bedstead, gaudily quilted. The old woman followed him.

"I told you she wasn't here."

"I believe you now. Where is she?"

He came back into the first room and sat down on a chair the leg of which broke under him.

"Damn, what a place!"

The old woman cackled.

"I told you it wasn't fit for a gentleman like you. Mind if I go back to bed? I'm cold."

She huddled down into a heap of blankets and old clothes that filled one of the corners, rooting among them till she found a short clay pipe.

"Got any 'baccy on you, dear?"

Harry threw her his pouch and himself lit a cigarette. The smell of tobacco seemed to cleanse the room and he felt better. He said:

"I shan't go till you've told me where she is."

"What has it got to do with you?"

"It's got to do with me when she uses my name to plant herself on respectable people."

"Oh, they've asked for her character, have they?"

"Of course they have, and a pretty fool I looked."

"But I hope you were kind and spoke well of my poor daughter."

"I said I knew nothing about her. It was the kindest thing I could say."

"But it wasn't true, gentleman dear."

"If I'd spoken the truth——" He broke off. Her head, rising out of the shapeless hill of bedding, looked bodiless, set up like a target at a fair. He wished he had something hard to shy at it.

"Look here," he said. "You've got to tell me where she is."

"Where should she be, but at the place where your kind words sent her?"

"You mean at the Old Parsonage? You don't tell me she's started there already!"

"She started this morning. She was up at six o'clock, washing herself with water and plaiting her hair, so that she shouldn't disgrace you."

Harry laughed rudely.

"Well, if they're fools enough to take her without a reference. . . . She must have been up at the place already when the young lady asked me. 'Can you tell me anything about a girl called Nan Scallow?'" he minced vindictively, his memory irritated by the image of Lucinda Light. "Oh, yes, I can tell you a lot, miss—if I told you all I knew you'd be surprised."

"But you told her nothing."

"Nothing except that her mother was a diddicoy, and she didn't seem to see any harm in that."

"You've been a kind friend to us, gentleman dear; and the poor people never forget."

Harry turned on her furiously.

"Look here, you've got to tell me what game you're up to."

"Game?"

"Yes. Why has Nan gone to work at Mrs. Light's?"

"She needs the money."

"Oh, indeed. She must need it badly if she's taken to honest work."

"She's always worked hard, but now nobody will buy her baskets and the boys don't come near her any more. Since Michaelmas she's scarcely had so much as a present of half a crown. She's a good girl and has her old mother to support . . . at Mrs. Light's she gets ten shillings a week, as well as her meals. I tell you, she needs the money."

Harry had finished his cigarette, which he threw across the room into the fire.

"Tell me," he said, standing up, "how long will she be able to work before the child's born?"

The old woman squealed thinly like a mole in her heap of bedding.

"Oh dear, I wonder what ever made you think there's going to be a child."

"Never mind what made me think of it. I want to know when it's going to be born."

"None should know better than yourself, gentleman dear—unless you've never learned to calculate these things."

"Listen to me, you old hag—I know nothing about that child."

"Who should know, then?"

"I couldn't say—though I could give you the names of at least three men in Woodhorn who might be the father."

A bare, skinny arm shot up above the bedclothes.

"It's a lie. It's a dirty lie against my daughter."

"You're telling me she's a good girl, I suppose."

"She's a good daughter; and if you're going to insult the poor people you'd better clear out, you dirty gentleman. You go about saying any more such things and I'll lay my curse upon you—the gipsy's curse that never fails—to bind and burst your heart."

Harry walked to the door, where he turned and faced her.

"You can't scare me with your fair-ground curses, old Mis' Scallow. I'm off now, and if you and your daughter play me any more tricks I'll tell the police."

"And ask them to send poor Nan to prison for going to work?"

"For going to work with a false reference."

"It was you who gave her the reference, gentleman dear."

Her laughter followed him out of the room.

He ran thundering and creaking down the ladder stairs, and hurried away from the house without looking left or right. But when he came to the hill he slackened his pace. He was in no hurry to go home—he did not want to speak to anybody for a while. He wanted to think.

He had expected the old woman to lie to him, so he had got only what he expected. But he had hoped to be able to find out somehow, in spite of or even by means of her lies, one or two things he really wanted to know. He wanted to know why Nan Scallow had taken this job at Mrs. Light's, if she was going to have a child and if she meant to father it on him. He was still without an answer to the first and the last of these questions.

Lucinda Light had given him a shock that morning. "Do you know anything about a girl called Nan Scallow? . . . she seemed quite sure you'd give her a reference" . . . He could not think of the episode

without seeing her standing before him in her scarlet coat and cap and hearing her talk in her clear, gentle voice. He suddenly felt annoyed and kicked a stone. She was a queer piece, that girl. Not quite all there, some people said. Well, she and her mother were a couple of fools—no need to be sorry for them when they found out what they'd got. Besides, by common report, the mother herself had been going it a bit . . .

The point was: what was Nan up to? No doubt she wanted money, but who ever had heard of a gipsy working honestly for money if she could get it any other way? . . . by blackmail, for instance. He had thought from the start that her application to him for a "character" was a piece of blackmail. And possibly all the rest was, too. She could do him quite a lot of harm if she chose.

He was back at his old question: did she mean to father the child on him? The old woman had certainly pretended to believe that it was his, but he could not be sure how much further she meant the business to go. Perhaps her recent conversation with him had only been one of several with other Woodhorn men. She might hope to get money out of them all. On the other hand, she might have picked him out because of that other order against him and because he was better off than any of the rest.

Harry stopped in the lane, feeling sick. He pulled out his pipe and lit it. He must think clearly, and calmly too if he could. Of course if Nan meant to bring him before the magistrates, you could see a reason for taking the job at Mrs. Light's. It would make her appear something more like a respectable woman: she would run a better chance of impressing them and bamboozling them . . . alternatively she could charge a higher price for being bought off.

What a fool he'd been! Looking back now, he could scarcely believe that he had done it—gone with gipsy trash which no decent farmer would look at except in contempt. Lord knew he wasn't much of a chap when it came to morals, but he knew better than that. He'd known all the time that he was doing wrong, and for none of the time had he been pleased either with her or with himself. Why had he done it, then? Because of Richard, of course. Richard was at the

bottom of it, as he was at the bottom of all that was bad and dirty and miserable in his brother's life. If Richard hadn't brought home Joan . . .

His thoughts broke suddenly. He was close to the lower edge of Harbolets Shaw, about fifty yards from the gate, when out of it came Lucinda Light, swinging left up the hill. She was looking straight in front of her, so she did not see him. He was glad. What a time she had stayed at the farm—talking to Joan, he supposed. She seemed very friendly with Joan . . . well, he was lucky to have missed her. If he hadn't stopped in the lane to light his pipe they'd have met in the shaw.

The sun was shining now, though feebly out of a pale sky. The sky behind the trees was washed with light rather than sunshine, and the shadows on the ground looked unreal, as if cast by other shadows. Harry walked a few yards into the shaw and sat down on a dead stump. He still did not feel inclined to go home, and there was nothing much he could do there till the tegs were shipped off and Richard gone. Then he remembered that the lorry would have to drive past where he sat, and, getting up, he plunged deeper into the shaw, to where it was thickened by brambles and he could neither see nor be seen by anyone on the farm lane.

Under one of the few oaks which broke the monotony of the stoles he lay down on a blanket of dry moss spread over the roots. The leaves had not yet really begun to fall—only a few earth-coloured chestnut leaves lay round him; the oak still lifted a full green crown, only faintly dingied by the autumn cold. He propped himself against the trunk and smoked—he'd feel better when he'd finished his pipe. After he had been there a few minutes he heard voices in the lane—women's voices. That must be Madge and Joan on their way to the 'bus. He straightened his back against the tree and lifted his head, wondering if he could see them; he wanted to see if Joan was wearing her new fur-collared coat and little round felt hat. But the undergrowth was too thick—he could not see her at all; and soon afterwards the voices died away.

But they had ruined the fragile peace his pipe had brought him.

The sound of Joan's voice had sent him back into the darkness of his thoughts about Nan. It was because of her that he had gone with Nan. But he did not blame Joan—he blamed his brother. It was Richard's triumph in bringing her home like that—so small, so sweet, so lovely, so different from them all at Loats—that had driven him crazy with the need to find someone like her for himself, someone just as lovely, sweet, and different . . .

He would never forget the morning he had first seen her. He had not been there when she arrived the night before—he had gone up to the Plough in Woodhorn Street on purpose to miss her and had stayed till closing time. Daisy had gone out too, to the pictures in Pot-common, but his mother had stayed at home, because she did not want Richard's wife to touch her saucepans.

Of course they had all been furious when they heard he had gone away to be married. Madge had told Chodd the news in front of Harry and Mrs. Cobsale, which was the way Richard had chosen to break it to the other side of the family. She had just come back from the wedding, which had taken place in Marlingate, the big seaside town twelve miles away; Chaffield was a widower and Joan had been married from an aunt's house. Madge described it all in detail to Chodd and was telling him about the bridesmaids' dresses, when Mrs. Cobsale interrupted to ask him how much money old Chaffield had given his daughter. Madge, properly deaf till Chodd repeated the question, answered that Mr. Chaffield had so far given her nothing but her clothes. He had six daughters and his money was all sunk in his farms; besides, though he thought a lot of Richard he knew that he was not the sole owner of Loats and there was no telling. . . . Here Harry had broken into the conversation, which became very abusive before it was brought to an end by Chodd's running away and thus depriving the combatants of their means of communication.

A bitter and nearly silent week-end followed—Mrs. Cobsale, Harry and Daisy feeling too deeply offended to discuss the marriage even among themselves. Then on Tuesday morning Harry had come into the kitchen for breakfast and seen a girl standing by the table. She had looked scarcely more than a child, with her hair hanging to her

shoulders in soft red-brown curls, and her coloured pinafore almost straight from neck to knees, so slight was the curve of her little breast. The sight of her had startled him—he had not expected to find her waiting there; he had expected her to make a swaggering entrance with Richard, later on when they were all at breakfast. Nor was he prepared to see her so small and sweet. He had only a dim, collective idea of the Chaffield girls and would not have known one of them by sight without their father.

His surprise must have shown itself, for she laughed in quite a friendly way; and almost before he knew what had happened he was laughing too. Then his laugh had dried, withered by the sudden appearance of Richard behind her in the scullery doorway. He could tell how his face must have changed by the change in hers. Her eyes had clouded with dismay and a look of childish hurt, which had made him even angrier, because for some unfathomable reason he felt hurt too. . . . Then she had turned to Richard and he had rushed straight out of the room.

That night he had gone to Nan Scallow. He had gone to her because he knew that he could never have Joan nor anyone like her. In some mysterious way his desire for a good and lovely thing was linked with that black fulfilment. Since he could not triumph over Richard by showing him a girl as sweet as his own—there was no one like her in Woodhorn and if there were she wouldn't look at Harry Cobsale—he would triumph over him by outraging every convention of his smug, respectable life—fill him with shame and anger, since he could not fill him with jealousy.

So he had gone to Nan, spent over ten pounds on her in a month and made a scandal that had shaken Woodhorn. But the shame and anger were not Richard's: they were his own. No doubt Richard would feel some of their heat if Nan brought a paternity suit against his brother, but that was not the way Harry wanted to plague him.

Perhaps the best thing he could do would be to clear out—get right away from Loats Farm and start a place of his own. Then he'd be shut of Nan, shut of Richard, shut of Joan. . . . Yet, how was he to do that with all the money tied up in the land and in the stock? Everything

had been left to him and Richard jointly; there was nothing that he could claim as his own and turn into ready cash.

Besides, he was fond of the place—it was his home, he had been born there and he didn't want to leave it. If he went, Richard would have a free hand; he would be able to do exactly as he liked, go into business with Chaffield if he wanted. Whereas if Harry stayed he could keep some sort of a hold on things, prevent his brother turning the farm into a butcher-grazier's holding. He felt sure that if he left, Richard would grub up the hops and sell his quota for cash down—that of course would be one way out for himself if he really wanted to go. Richard would certainly agree: he'd be glad to be rid of him and the hops too.

He must not give Richard that chance. Nor did he want the village to say that he had been driven away by his brother or scared away by Nan Scallow. No, he would have to stay on where he was, in spite of the misery of living with people he hated, in spite of this new trouble with Nan Scallow, in spite of the daily sight of Joan. . . . When he came to think of Joan he was not sure if he stayed in spite of her or because of her . . .

Anyway, his pipe was out and he'd spent enough time thinking of awkward things. He stood up under the oak-tree, stretching his big limbs in the heavy, farmer's clothes that did not fit him, because he could never spare the time nor the trouble to get them properly made. He was not sure if the lorry had gone by or not, but he did not really care. He was not going to wait any longer in this place. He'd go back to the house and get his gun and see if he couldn't pot a few conies down by the marsh.

JESS MARLOTT

JESS MARLOTT lifted the lid of the saucepan and looked in sadly. A tear fell into the hissing stew and she smiled ruefully to herself. Then she prodded the contents with a fork. . . . Hard as leather, wanted at least another two hours; by the time that fowl was cooked the fuel would have paid for a decent joint of meat.

That was one of the things that made life so difficult. Neither she nor Greg was really practical. On the face of it there seemed much to be said for living on their superannuated hens; but a really practical person would have considered at once the price of a boiling that lasted so many hours on an oil stove, with oil at ninepence a gallon. A really practical person would have fried a couple of chops, or some fish, or even—it would have cost very little more—had a cut from the joint and two veg. at the Plough and saved herself this labour which was breaking her back. She drew away from the stove; her tears fell so fast into the saucepan that she was afraid they might put the damn thing off the boil.

But she was not crying because she had wasted a lot of money on trying to cook an uneatable old hen, nor because she was hot and tired, nor because she had a very bad pain that came and went under her ribs at intervals (what part of one was it one had there?—was it kidneys or liver or what? She'd like to know, because if it went on she'd have to buy a bottle of patent medicine and she might as well get it for the right thing. Well, no doubt some illustrated advertisement would tell her). She was crying because she had scarcely stopped crying for one moment since Greg came home last night. All night long she had felt the pillow warm and drenched under her face, and when after an uneasy hour of slumber she had waked to find her cup of early tea beside the bed she had cried into that, drinking her own tears, and then she had cried

again when she found that Greg had eaten his breakfast and gone out; and now the tears still fell, rolling over puffed cheeks out of smarting eyes—she would really have to see what she could do to her face before dinner-time.

At dinner-time she would have to see Greg and speak to him again . . . at the thought of this her tears seemed to rise in a burning flood under her eyelids, for they were mainly tears of pity, pity for herself and him—most of all for him. That was what made it all hurt so much . . . she did not feel what women were expected to feel on these occasions: anger, jealousy, hatred or disgust. In the novels she used to read—years ago, for it was years since she had had a library subscription—women whose husbands had just told them they loved someone else had a variety of emotions to sustain them. If only she could have felt the comfort of a good, honest, bursting indignation! If only she could have hated Greg and locked her door against him, instead of cherishing him sorrowfully in her arms until at last he had fallen asleep upon her heart. . . . Was there anything wrong with her, she wondered, that made her so different from other women and her marriage, apparently, so different from other marriages? Or was it only because she and Greg had been married twenty years before this had happened, had grown into each other and become part of each other, so that each had for the other the same sort of understanding that one has for oneself?

Of course she felt angry with Mrs. Light—indignant, furious; but it did not help her much—no more than it helps a mother whose child has been kidnapped to hate the kidnapper. The thought of that cruel, reckless, heartless kidnapper only made matters worse. It was Greg she would have liked to hate and could not. She could only love him whatever he did—even though he had ceased to love her. . . . But that was incredible, impossible, and it wasn't true. He loved her still—must love her still—even though now incredibly and impossibly he loved someone else.

She sat down on one of the kitchen chairs, staring in front of her with eyes that were dry at last, while her mind returned to the bewildering scene last night. Had it really happened? But for her aching

head and this sickness of tears she could have thought she had dreamed it. It was his lying to her that had shown her that the incredible thing was true. Till then she had not believed it for a moment—not when Mrs. Malpas had told her that he was at the Old Parsonage and that he went there every evening, not when she herself had seen him through the window, sitting and drinking with Mrs. Light. She had accepted the facts, the evidence of her own and another woman's eyes, but it had never even occurred to her to put on them what she saw now was the obvious construction. She had waited for Greg, expecting him to come home and tell her about it, to explain it all. Instead of which he had lied.

He had lied expertly, too—at least firmly and fluently—"I'm sorry I'm late, but the fog hung me up on the marsh. . . ." Now she came to think of it he must have lied to her on other nights, when he told her he had been obliged to go to Marlingate or that his car had broken down. He had become quite an expert liar . . .

No, not so very expert. For directly she challenged him his lie had broken down.

She had cried out:

"But, Greg, you've been with Mrs. Light at the Old Parsonage for the last two hours. I saw you sitting there."

At that he had stammered and asked her what she meant, tried to bluster in a feeble way, accused her of eavesdropping and of listening to gossip. But he had not been able to keep it up. Her tears came scalding back again when she remembered how his defences had collapsed, how he had fumbled and blundered, tripped and contradicted himself, stammered and blurted.

But even then she had not been prepared for the worst. When she had said to him: "But, Greg, you're not in love with her?" she had expected him to answer: "No, of course I'm not, but she's nice to talk to and it's nice sitting there. I didn't tell you because I thought you mightn't like it" or that "you might have wanted to come too and it would have been difficult." She had expected him to say something like that, or like "she's a vamp and likes to have men sitting around and I was afraid that if I refused we might lose her custom," or even

"it's only a flirtation—I don't know what made me do it." Instead of which he had leaned forward—they had both been sitting opposite each other by the stove—caught her two hands in his and cried out, weeping:

"Oh, Jess, I love her—I love her—I can't help it."

That was a memory which she felt that twenty years of happiness—and she was not likely to have them—could never wipe out. She had kept his hands in hers, however, and had met his eyes—his bewildered grey eyes which seemed to be crying to her for help out of his poor, convulsed face. Holding hands and looking into each other's eyes they had tried to explain and to understand this strange and terrible thing that had happened to them both.

"But, Greg, how did it start? How long have you felt like this? Why . . ."

"I dunno. It's just seeing her, I suppose."

"Did she—Oh, she must have led you on."

"She asked me in to have a drink, but I was pretty far gone before that."

"How long? A month ago?"

"Two months ago."

Her anger rose against Brenda Light.

"She's a dangerous woman. Mrs. Malpas was speaking to me about her only this afternoon. She's been in some dreadful scandal up in London and her husband died of a broken heart."

He did not let go of her hands as he answered:

"I know. I know there's a lot of gossip about her; though I'm sure she's been more sinned against than sinning. She's not what you think. But that doesn't excuse me. It's only that I can't—I can't—help myself."

He had bowed his head over their clasped hands and she had felt his tears upon them. It was then that her own had first started to fall—that torrent which she felt now would never dry.

"Oh, Jess," he had cried. "Don't hate me."

"My dear, how could I ever hate you?"

"I've tried so hard—yes, really I've tried. I—I've forced myself not

to see her for days. Once I even left the eggs on the kitchen window-sill."

"My poor, poor old man."

"Oh, Jess, I'm a hound, I'm a fiend."

She had wanted to laugh as she looked down at his bowed, grey head, and that desire had hurt her more than all her tears.

"It's not your fault," she had cried angrily, "it's hers. She must have led you on. Greg," with a sudden turn to realism, "has she—have you ever kissed her?"

He answered sadly:

"Only once or twice—at least," offering her the truth in expiation, "I don't suppose more than half a dozen times."

She was shocked. Till that moment she had imagined an unexpressed devotion, a silent "smite." Then suddenly her mind leaped forward into an idea so appalling that she could hardly express it. She could only clutch his hands and weep, crying:

"Oh, darling, you don't—Oh, Greg, do you—do you want to—I mean, a divorce. . . ."

She realized now that at every question she had expected a reassuring answer and that it had been like a physical blow each time when it never came.

He had mumbled something and she had felt ready to faint when she caught the gist of his words. How could he ask a woman like Brenda Light to share his failure of a life? even if they could afford a divorce, which they couldn't . . . divorce . . . alimony. . . . It seemed impossible that he should be saying these words to her—Greg Marlott to Jess Marlott. Oh, what a fool she had been! She had thought that life he'd nothing worse for her than failure—than the struggle to work and live—illness, perhaps, and death. But now she knew that these were little things in comparison with what she had had now, so suddenly and shockingly, been called upon to endure. At this thought for the first time she felt and feared for herself.

"But, Greg," she cried out, "what am I to do? What about *me*?"

He lifted his face.

"My poor old girl—nothing. I've told you, there's nothing we can do at all."

"But do you still love me?"

Another hope: another blow. He had hesitated.

"Darling, I do love you—yes, in a way—in lots of ways. But this is different."

"How is it different?" She forced herself to view the situation calmly and as she thought practically. "Is it more physical?"

"Ye-es. But it isn't only that. It's not just—just desire. It's something much, much more. It's like—— Oh, how can I tell you? I can't find the words. It's like—like a song in my heart—like waking up on a sunny morning. . . ."

Then for some reason, as they looked at each other, they had both laughed. It had been funny to hear old Greg speak like that—funny and terrible. She had almost seemed to feel her heart die within her.

After that all they had done had been to say the same things over and over again. . . . She could not remember much more, only at last his falling asleep in her arms, uncomforted but exhausted, while she, as deeply exhausted, lay awake. During the night she had thought of dozens of things to say to him, but she had not said one. She had scarcely seen him at all to-day except in the distance, out of doors. But he would soon be coming in to his dinner—it was nearly time. Then she would have to speak. She simply could not let life shut down upon this horrible thing.

She went back to the stove. The hen seemed tougher than ever. *Poule au pot*—that was what the French called it, but surely the French did not eat their hens like that. . . . What magic had the French housewife? No doubt, she thought, the magic of a cheap fire. The whole thing would have gone much better if the kitchen range had been usable instead of smoking the room out whenever she attempted to light it. She could have stood the saucepan all day at the back. . . . But they had been forced to cook on an oil stove, because it would cost too much to rebuild the kitchen chimney. The house was new, but it was falling down already. Oh why did this sort of thing always happen to the Marlotts?

A man's shape went past the window. Was that Greg? No, it was only Woodsell, the chicken-boy, who worked for them in the mornings. But he was evidently on his way home to dinner and Greg would be in soon.

Jess ran into the bedroom and took out of a drawer her only aid to beauty, a compact wherein an elderly powder puff still held the last of the *trefle incarnat* that Greg had given her for her birthday in 1929. With this she carefully dusted her damaged face. She really couldn't let him see her like this: she had a rival now. The thought was like a dose of bitter medicine. She had a rival to compete with—she, who when she was young and gay had never thought of one. Now that she was middle-aged and tired and ill she must pull herself together and match herself against a lovely, rich, experienced woman. . . . No, she could never do it—there was no use trying. Her face looked even worse now with the powder on it. She threw the compact back into the drawer, and returning to the kitchen, gave herself a good wash over the sink.

When at last they sat down to dinner she was not surprised to find that Greg seemed anxious to avoid a repetition of last night's discussion. Like most men, he would rather have a corpse stinking than a ghost walking. He would rather that this terrible thing lay patchily buried between them than that it rose to harrow them with problems they could not solve and regrets they could not assuage. So he began to talk about the poultry: the new chicken-house he was building with Woodsell, the new cockerels he had bought last week at Potcommon market.

"Woodsell says he doesn't like their eyes, but I can't see anything wrong with them."

"What does Woodsell see?"

"Paralysis. He says he can tell by the eyes, but I don't believe him. After all, I've kept chicken as long as he has."

"He's all for us having nothing but light Sussex—local feeling, I suppose."

"He says there's less disease in them. But I say you can't beat a Rhode Island, neither for the eggs nor for the table."

"I could think of a better table bird than the one we're eating," said Jess, as with as much decorum as possible she restored a resistant mouthful to her plate.

"We've evidently kept her a shade too long."

"A shade. . . ."

She found herself actually forgetting, and smiling at him fondly as she watched him there, chewing away, full of hope and goodwill, making the best of his dreadful dinner, though it must have been worse for him than it was for her, as he suffered with his teeth and sometimes found even ordinary mastication painful. My poor old man . . .

"Well," he said, "it seems a pity to eat a fowl we could get a price for as a boiler. Wouldn't she do for soup?"

"*Poule au pot* . . . it would cost far too much, unless we had a proper kitchen range."

"Well, I don't see why we shouldn't some day. Everyone says that prices are going up next year."

Next year. They would still be together next year. Of course he had no thought of leaving her. It was only that he was in love with someone else.

"Greg," she said in a sharp little voice, "what are you doing this afternoon?"

She thought that he looked self-conscious.

"I've some eggs to leave at Parislane, and I'm taking half a dozen cockerels—the ones that Woodsell calls 'they toms'—to a chap at Diamond Farm who's——"

"Are you going to see Mrs. Light?"

He flushed almost angrily.

"Really, Jess . . . I thought we'd agreed not to talk of that again."

They had agreed no such thing and he knew it.

"I must talk of it, Greg. I must get it settled."

"How can it ever be settled?"

"Settled in my mind, I mean. There are some things I've been thinking of—that I—I must know."

He took a packet of gaspers out of his pocket and nervously lit

one of them. She was desperately sorry for him, but she knew that she must be firm, for both their sakes.

"Darling, I'm not blaming you. I know that this is just—is just a thing that—has happened. I know you've done your best."

He turned to her desperately.

"I have, Jess. I swear I have. I've struggled against it from the moment I felt it coming. But it's got too much for me."

"My poor old Greg."

She felt thankful as she realized that she did not want to cry. Her mind and body were drained of grief. All she wanted now was to know these things that she must make him tell her.

She fixed her eyes on him.

"Tell me this: Have you ever loved me in the way that you love her?"

He shook his head.

"I've never felt this in my life before."

"Then has your feeling for me changed or is it the same as it always was?"

He looked embarrassed.

"My dear, I can't tell you. I don't know. I only know that this is different."

"You're quite sure that it isn't just a passing infatuation?"

He looked offended.

"It isn't; and I won't say it is—even to comfort you, Jess."

"I don't know that it would comfort me. Greg, tell me this: if we were as well off as Mrs. Light and in the same social position, would you want me to divorce you?"

He sprang to his feet and nervously lit another gasper though his first was not half smoked.

"How can I tell you? Or rather, I have told you. The question simply doesn't arise. You might as well ask what I'd do if I'd never married you at all. The point is that a divorce is unthinkable—for any of us."

"Then what do you propose to do?"

He looked surprised.

"Do? Nothing. What can I do?"

"Shall you go on seeing her?"

He was pacing about the room, but at her question he stopped and stared. She saw his eyes change; they became like a little boy's eyes—both defiant and afraid.

"I must see her. There's no good your thinking you can stop me doing that. It's what I live for. It's all I've got."

"But how can it make you happy when you know that nothing can come of it?"

"I dunno; it does—that's all. All the day seems leading up to it, and then when I'm with her it's happiness and release; and then when I leave her it's hell."

"In fact, it's a craving—like drink."

He shook his head impatiently.

"You just don't understand."

For some reason Jess felt desperately offended at this.

"It's her I don't understand," she snapped, "how she can let you come and sit with her day after day, hour after hour, knowing that you're a married man. I suppose she does know that?"

"Yes, of course she does."

"Then I think she's behaving very unscrupulously. It only shows the sort of woman——"

"I'm not going to let you talk against her, Jess."

She suddenly lost her temper with him.

"Don't be such a fool! Of course I'm going to talk against her. I'm going to say anything I like. Why on earth shouldn't I? She's taken my husband's love from me and spoilt my life. Why should I be mealy-mouthed? I'd like to tell her exactly what I think—no, you needn't be afraid; I shan't do it, but I certainly shan't stop myself telling you."

She was pleased to find that her anger had not led to tears; she was gradually working herself into a very different mood from the mood of last night. But she had not struck out any responding anger from him. He looked guilty rather than angry, saying nothing, merely fumbling out his last cigarette and throwing away the empty packet. She drew a deep breath and went on:

"After all, it's common knowledge that she deceived her husband—not once but many times. I don't know what sort of woman you make out of that. And I simply can't understand how that sort of woman can attract a man like you—really attract you, I mean. That's why I say it's an infatuation—a craving, like drink. Greg, you can't really love her—not in your inmost heart. It's only that she's excited and upset you, and—and—you aren't used to these things."

He sighed as he said:

"It's no use, Jess; you *don't* understand."

"But what is there about her that attracts you? Beyond her looks, of course."

"It's everything about her—the way she talks, the way she walks, the way she moves and thinks. Besides, she has a very sweet and lovely mind. You're entirely wrong about her. She's not 'that sort of woman,' as you call her. I know she's had a dreadful tragedy and she's come down here to try to forget it. But she hasn't got the past that you and all the Woodhorn gossips accuse her of. I tell you," he added solemnly as if he had discovered a new and final explanation of the whole thing, "she's more sinned against than sinning."

For a moment Jess was silent. She still felt angry with him, but some of her old compassion had returned. Greg in love was what she might have expected—quite silly. Poor old man. . . . What could she do to protect him from this flame round which he was blundering so heavily and helplessly? She saw now that something must be done, and done by her, since he neither could nor would do anything for himself.

"Don't you think," she said, trying to speak reasonably, "that it would be a good thing if you made a definite resolution not to see her for a week?"

"I couldn't."

"Not even for a week?"

"No. I should only break my word and start deceiving you again. Jess, can't we let things stay as they are? Leave it at my going there now and then in the evenings and seeing her and speaking to her——"

"And kissing her sometimes?"

He turned his head away.

"Look here," said Jess, "what does *she* feel about it all? Does *she* know you love her like this?"

"She must."

"And does she love you?"

"I don't know—I daren't ask her. Oh, won't you see? I've got so little—I can't bear the thought of having even that little taken away."

"My poor darling."

She went up to him and put her arm round his shoulders. All her tenderness was back, but without tears, for the thing was looking different now. The first shock was over and she suddenly found that she knew what to do. A plan had unfolded itself in her mind, a desperate remedy needing all her intelligence and courage, but at least providing her with a field of action and some sort of a hope.

"Jess," he said, "couldn't we make a definite resolution not to talk about this for a time—say, a week."

"Very well."

"You agree?"

"Yes, for a week; no more—I couldn't manage longer than that. And now, you really must go out, if you're to finish putting up the new house before you start for Parislane."

As he went out of the door she saw him fumbling in his pocket for the packet of fags that wasn't there.

"Greg," she called after him, "you can take sixpence for some more cigarettes out of my housekeeping purse."

BRENDA LIGHT

WITH no housework to do, Brenda Light felt a princess. She spent the morning in the freedom of her easy chair, with her cigarettes and a newspaper and a library novel that had been two days in the house unread. She did not mean to spend every morning so indolently; this was just a celebration of the first in her own particular way. Lucinda's way was different. She had run down to Loats Farm before breakfast, and then had gone off with the Rectory children to a picnic at Moll Kemp's Grave. Brenda did not altogether approve of the expedition.

"Why should you go and eat sandwiches on anybody's grave? It seems to me a ghoulish idea."

"It's a meeting of the Antiquarian Society. Moll Kemp's Grave is very interesting. I believe the baby's buried there too. It was found in the garden of the Chequers Inn and dug up."

Really for a dreamy adolescent Lucinda was in some ways surprisingly tough. Brenda shuddered.

"I think that you and Humfrey Malpas spend far too much time talking horrors. What was he going on about here last night? The ghost of a highwayman or something. And now it's a murderess's grave. I should think the Antiquarian Society could find some better place to meet at. You and those children are the only members, I suppose."

"Well, the gardener belongs and the maid—May Beeney. But they don't ever come to the meetings."

"No, I shouldn't think they would. And I don't really like your going. I wish you could meet some really normal people—people of your own age, I mean, interested in ordinary things."

"I don't know that *I'm* interested in ordinary things—at least, if

you mean things like tennis and dances. And it isn't just since we've come here. I think I always was like that."

It was the first time she had taken a conversation any sort of way into the past. Brenda obeyed the impulse to follow it there.

"Yes, I know. You always liked the same sort of things as your father."

Once more the veil dropped over Lucinda's eyes.

"I like books," she said carefully, "and walking in the country and going to see old places. That's why I like being with the Malpas family—they're keen on that sort of thing."

"So was your father, but he didn't revel in horrors in quite the same way. Lucinda, you look quite frightened. I object to your frightening yourself like this."

"I'm not frightening myself. These things like Moll Kemp's Grave don't frighten me."

"What is it, then?"

"Nothing," said Lucinda almost defiantly.

Brenda realized that she had better drop the subject.

"All right, darling; have it your own way. But kiss me and tell me you'll take care of yourself."

For a moment, the fraction of a second, Lucinda hesitated . . . then she ran to her mother and threw her arms round her neck, leaning her golden head against her dark one. As Brenda felt her fragile tenseness, the thud of her leaping heart, and smelled the fugitive fragrance of her young flesh, cool and clean as grass, she experienced a desperate thankfulness that there was at least one thing in her life that she had not destroyed.

Later on, when her daughter was gone, the thankfulness became laced with dread. If Lucinda should ever find out about her and Michael. . . . It was mere self-deception to suppose that she never would. Even in Woodhorn they were still surrounded with gossip, and there was no telling how soon some of it might pierce the golden armour of her dreams. After all, though in some ways incredibly simple, the child was no fool. Already she might have her suspicions . . . there had been that hesitation before the embrace. . . .

Forgetting her royal ease, Brenda sprang out of her chair and began to walk about the room. Pray God she did not have to lose her daughter as she had lost her husband and her lover and everything that had once been her world—as she had lost that other world of Brenda Campion and Woodhorn Parsonage. . . . When she thought of these lost worlds she herself felt lost—lost in a dark new world of her own creation. Why had she left London and come down to this lost, meaningless place? Why had she quarrelled with Michael? She could have restored at least some part of her life with his help. But she had broken with it all—run from it wildly and heedlessly—and now she was lost; with only an occasional, doubtful touch of Lucinda's hand in the dark to show her she was not quite alone. And even that touch some day. . . . Hullo! what's that?

It was Mrs. Shafto opening the door and ushering in Mrs. Malpas. One fruit of domestic liberation was that she now considered herself able to answer to the front door, a task hitherto performed either by her mistress or her mistress's daughter. This was just as well, for Brenda had been too deep in her thoughts to hear the bell ring. Now she felt startled and not altogether pleased.

"Oh, good morning, Mrs. Light. I'm sorry to burst in on you like this, but——" She turned round and glared at Mrs. Shafto who was leaving the room.

"I can't very well say it in front of her," she continued just before she shut the door, "but I felt I ought to come and warn you. Oh, thanks so much. I don't smoke as a rule, but I do enjoy a cigarette."

She sat down, looking very pleased with herself.

Brenda asked:

"What have you come to warn me about?"

"About that girl, Nan Scallow. Lucinda told us this morning that you'd got a daily help, and of course I was frightfully pleased, as I know what it is to be without one, and you've been so long. . . . But I was surprised, because I know practically all the girls round here who go out obliging, and they're all booked up or I'd have found you one. Please believe that."

"I do believe it, I assure you. But what about Nan?"

"Well, Hugo says that if I'm not careful, some day I'll be run in for slander. But my theory is that this is a privileged occasion. I always understood that maids' references are privileged, otherwise it wouldn't be much use having them, would it?"

"Nan Scallow didn't have a proper reference. She said she'd worked at Loats Farm and that Harry Cobsale, I think it was, would speak for her; but I didn't bother to ask him. To tell you the honest truth, Mrs. Malpas, I don't care what she's like as long as she'll scrub my floors—and that I'm told she does very well."

"But——"

Mrs. Malpas looked deflated and embarrassed.

"I suppose," continued Brenda, "you're going to tell me she's going to have a baby?"

"Oh, is she? That's something new. I didn't know about that."

Brenda was surprised—and considerably relieved. If Mrs. Malpas didn't know about that baby then almost certainly it wasn't there.

"What is it, then? Is she dishonest?"

"No-o-o, I really can't say I ever heard anything against her in that way. Which is queer, as she's half a gipsy, and gipsies are terrible thieves."

"Oh, she's a gipsy, is she? Perhaps that accounts for her being so much better looking than most of the girls round here."

"Her mother's a gipsy. Her father was a carter at Limbo Farm."

"I really don't mind who or what she is—or what she does, as long as she doesn't upset the old cook I've had for fifteen years. I'm glad you haven't heard anything about a baby—I was only judging by appearances, and quite probably I'm wrong."

"I hope you are. Poor little thing!"

Again Brenda was surprised.

"I don't think you need feel sorry for her. If there is a baby, I bet she knew what she was doing."

"Oh . . . it isn't her I'm thinking of—it's the child. It would have a dreadful mother. But there isn't much good my telling you about her, as you don't seem to care."

She looked so disappointed that Brenda almost laughed.

"Don't misunderstand me. I'm not usually so indifferent as to the sort of people I engage, but at the moment I'm desperate. I've only this one old servant here and she won't and can't do all the work of a house like this. Up till now my daughter and I have been doing quite a lot of it, but I'm fed up and I want a change. What I should really like to have is a decent house-parlourmaid, and then I assure you I *should* be particular as to her references; but as I can't get her I must be content with someone who'll come in and do the heavy work. Mrs. Shafto doesn't mind the rest if she gets that taken off her hands; and I really don't think it matters who does it."

She spoke amiably, because she did not think that Mrs. Malpas had been prompted so much by ill-nature as by a sort of clerical love of interference coupled with a blundering goodwill.

"I know, I know, Mrs. Light. Beggars can't be choosers, and she's a strong, healthy girl and ought to be able to do even *your* scrubbing quite easily—I mean, you've got some dreadful passages and kitchen, haven't you? . . . And of course if she *is* going to have a baby, house-work's supposed to be good for it. What's worrying me is the way people will talk."

"Talk about what?"

"About you, I'm afraid. They're sure to say it's because of—I mean they'll say you can't be very particular if you employ a girl like Nan Scallow."

"I don't care what they say."

"No, no, of course not; and I don't want to interfere—it isn't my business, and Hugo would tell me I've no right. . . . But I can't help—I mean it's Lucinda. She's such a sweet child and it's so bad for her to have people saying the things they do."

"What do they say?" asked Brenda crisply.

Mrs. Malpas coloured.

"Oh . . . I don't know. All sorts of things. If it isn't one thing, then it's another. . . . Of course it doesn't really make any difference, and I shouldn't mind if it wasn't for Lucinda. It's her I worry about."

"I'm quite able to look after her, thanks."

"I know, I know. But I don't think you realize . . . I mean this Nan Scallow business coming on the top of the other."

Brenda looked at her coldly. She was beginning to feel angry.

"May I ask what you're referring to?"

Mrs. Malpas did not answer for a moment and Brenda suspected that she had swallowed the end of her cigarette, for she gulped several times and flushed an even deeper colour before she said in a strangled voice:

"I was referring to Mr. Marlott."

"Mr. Marlott! Where on earth does he come in?"

"Well, you see, his car's outside this house almost every day. . . ."

Brenda suddenly was furious.

"And why shouldn't it be? Can't I have a friend drop in for a drink without starting a deluge of filthy tattle? This place is hell. If I wasn't broke I'd clear out to-morrow. Really, Mrs. Malpas, I do think a clergyman's wife might find something better to do than go about repeating a lot of miserable gossip. I suppose I've you to thank, as you live opposite, for spreading this story about Greg Marlott's car."

"I haven't spread it," said Mrs. Malpas, with a sort of clumsy dignity. "I assure you that gossip doesn't start at the Rectory though it often ends there. A number of people have spoken to me about Mr. Marlott's car, but I myself haven't said a word about it to a single soul—except," blundering into the truth as her memory tactlessly held it out to her, "except Mrs. Marlott."

"His wife! You've told *her*?"

"Yes. I'm sorry now that I did—I always regret it when I pass things on. But I called at Honeypools for some more eggs yesterday, and she was wondering where he was—so I told her."

"I see. And had she no idea till yesterday?"

"No—apparently not the slightest."

"Oh, well," said Brenda, "I don't suppose she minds."

"No," said Mrs. Malpas candidly, "she didn't look as if she minded at all."

Brenda's anger cooled off into a laugh.

"Then I don't think anyone else need mind—nor about Nan Scallow, either. Have another cigarette, Mrs. Malpas."

After all, the woman had been very kind to Lucinda.

"No, thanks very much. I really think I must be going now. You don't mind my having come and said all this, do you? But I simply felt I ought to tell you about Nan Scallow."

Brenda was too glad to get rid of her to point out to her that she had told her nothing.

Some of the royal peace of her morning was destroyed by that interview. She always disliked hearing gossip about herself. The gossips' tongues were like cats' tongues passing over her, irritating her with a sort of silky roughness. Also, though she despised Woodhorn society, she did not like to be reminded that her exclusion from it was deliberate.

Another victim was poor Nan Scallow. . . . No, she certainly would not get rid of her. Apart from the blessings of her broom and pail, it would be a mean thing for one focus of Woodhorn scandal to forsake another. She speculated without much interest as to the nature of Nan's misdeeds. No doubt the mere fact that she was of gipsy blood would go a long way in a country of farmers. Perhaps she had been in prison for something . . . but on the whole she inclined to the idea that she was a sort of village prostitute. That would account for Mrs. Malpas's rather bridling manner and also for her obvious lack of direct acquaintance. Brenda had come to the conclusion that she did not really know the girl, but had based her warning on a general reputation.

Well, she wasn't going to do anything about it as long as Nan behaved decently and did her work. The only danger was that Mrs. Shafto might hear of something. . . . But Mrs. Shafto mixed no more than her mistress in local society; she did not even have dealings with the village tradesmen, as Brenda had secured her independence of Farable's Stores by means of a small car which took her once or twice a week to the better supplied shops of the market town. So Mrs. Shafto wasn't likely to learn anything immediately from backdoor

gossip; and if it was really true that there wasn't going to be a baby, the Light household could look forward to tranquillity for two or three months at least.

During lunch Brenda made inquiries and received an encouraging report. Evidently Nan Scallow had discretion, for she had spent the time of the mid-morning cup of tea in listening to particulars of Mrs. Shafto's family and looking at their photographs.

"And isn't it strange, ma'am? Years ago her mother used to be head housemaid at Hornaby Grange where my nephew is footman now; and she's got an aunt married to the butler at Lady Clements', where my poor sister used to be."

Brenda was pleased to think that Nan evidently meant to stay.

By the time lunch was over she was feeling bored. She had grown accustomed to her new leisure and wanted some diversion. The only diversion she could think of was to take the car and drive into Pot-common for some shopping and perhaps a cinema. It was not an exhilarating prospect but she could think of nothing else, with Lucinda, her only chance of a companion, picnicking with the Rectory children on somebody's grave. If only Lucinda would want to be taken to a skating-rink or a palais de danse they might sometimes be able to amuse themselves in Marlingate.

She had gone upstairs rather dejectedly to put on her hat when she heard the front door bell ring. Who was it? Another visitor was improbable. Perhaps it was Mrs. Malpas come back with some after-thought. . . . Mrs. Shafto had gone to the door—she could hear her creaking step. Soon afterwards it creaked on the stairs.

"Come in," she said, as it reached her door.

Mrs. Shafto came in, wheezing emphatically.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but there's a person wants to see you."

"What sort of person?"

"I don't know who it is. I told her you were busy and just going out; but she said she must see you—wouldn't keep you long."

"Damn! what a nuisance." But she must not blame Mrs. Shafto, whose job it had never been to answer the door. She had better go

down and get rid of the woman herself, since she had no expert parlourmaid to do it for her.

"I expect she's come to sell something—a vacuum cleaner," she said as she ran downstairs.

"The companies generally send 'em round better turned out than that," Mrs. Shafto replied from above.

Brenda called over her shoulder:

"Perhaps it's a Bible, then."

But the woman on the doorstep did not seem to have even a Bible to sell. She wore a fawn cloth coat, whose old-fashioned, elaborate cut betrayed a bygone effort at "best," and a navy blue straw hat, decorated with a limp rose. Her face had a queer, yellowish look under the skin, which seemed too tight for it, stretched over high, well-modelled cheek-bones, loose only under the large, rather beautiful grey eyes, which looked out of the ruin with a sort of unhappy amazement.

"Good afternoon," said Brenda. She felt she ought to invite her in, but feared that if she did it might be difficult to get rid of her.

"Good afternoon. May I come in, please? I can't very well say what I've got to say out here."

Brenda guessed that she had come to beg.

"I'm sorry, but I think my maid told you that I'm just going out. I can't spare more than a moment."

The woman looked stricken, but obstinate.

"I know. But I must see you. I'll be as quick as I can."

One could not help feeling sorry for her.

"Couldn't you come back later? I shall be at home all the evening after tea, but I want to go out now."

"After tea would be no use. My husband will be here then."

"Your husband! . . ." Brenda started as she guessed what was coming next.

"Yes. I'm Mrs. Marlott."

"Oh, good afternoon, Mrs. Marlott. I'm sorry I didn't recognize you, but I don't think we've done more than see each other in the distance."

She spoke easily, but she felt annoyed. What on earth had the

woman come round for at this awkward time? She did not suppose that she had come to make a scene, for Mrs. Malpas herself had proclaimed her tolerance of the situation. Perhaps she had come on business—though she did not look like it—or perhaps she was taking advantage of the friendship she had just discovered to try to borrow money. . . . However, there was nothing to do now but to invite her in. After all, the visit to Potcommon was an expedient rather than a necessity. The week-end orders had already been fulfilled; she had only prescribed herself a little supplementary grocery and haberdashery as a specific against boredom. Perhaps Mrs. Marlott and her mysterious errand would do as well.

"Come in," she said graciously, and led the way into the sitting-room.

Mrs. Marlott sat down in the chair Greg usually occupied, and certainly lost no time in coming to the point.

"I want to talk to you about my husband. No thanks, I won't have a cigarette. I know now that he comes to see you nearly every evening."

Brenda was determined to take the situation lightly, though she was not yet quite sure which way it was going to develop.

"Yes—he quite often drops in on his way home. He brings the eggs and then sometimes he stops and chats a bit."

The other woman was silent and Brenda guessed that the lightness of her touch had baffled her. It was what she had intended, but she did not feel altogether pleased. This adversary was not like some others she had defeated—there would be little satisfaction in fencing with her skilfully before running her through the heart.

As she looked at her sitting there, with her worn sick face and shabby clothes, she had an extraordinary movement of compassion. She had never before felt sorry for any woman she had made uneasy. It had been her theory that a straying husband is a wife's responsibility, no one else's. But who could expect the husband of such a charmless bundle of a wife not to succumb to even the most half-hearted seduction? Never before had she met a woman on such unequal terms, and it spoilt the game for her. It was like stealing a child's sixpence.

"Look here," she said frankly, "I won't pretend not to understand you. I heard only this morning that there's been a certain amount of gossip about your husband's visits to this house. But I also heard that you did not object to them. Is that a mistake?"

"I don't know who could have told you that. Yes, certainly it's a mistake. I didn't know about them till yesterday—and then I didn't quite take it all in till he came home and began to—I mean till I asked him about it and he told me he loved you."

"He's told you he loves me!"

She was startled—almost shocked. That a man should be such a fool—so little ready with evasion. . . . Besides, she had not thought for a moment that Greg was in love with her. She had imagined—on the rare occasions when she thought of it at all—a pretty heavy fascination. She knew that she had broken like a fireball into the atmosphere of his dingy world, that she had given him the delight of something strange and new, and that no doubt he found her as exciting and entertaining as she found him the reverse. But she had never expected to do more than burn up a little of the atmosphere—it was an altogether different thing to realize that she had hit the earth. He had actually told his wife that he loved her. . . . It seemed incredible—both the loving and the telling.

"Yes; he was perfectly frank with me," continued Mrs. Marlott. "He told me that he'd fallen in love with you and couldn't keep away from you."

"Is he given to this sort of thing? Have you had any trouble of this kind before?"

Better talk to her like that—professionally, as one woman to another. There was a strange lack of rancour in the grey eyes that seemed to float up through a pool of tears to fix themselves on hers.

"We've been married twenty years and there's never been anyone else but me—till now."

"My God!" said Brenda.

The temperature of the interview seemed to have changed. She suddenly felt herself at a disadvantage—no longer mistress of a situation which she could mould to her own ends, either of destruction or of

clemency. She had not felt like this since that dreadful hour she had spent with Michael's mother. . . .

"It's true," continued Mrs. Marlott, "I never even imagined he could. . . . When Mrs. Malpas started hinting, I didn't understand her." She broke off. "Of course he knows it's hopeless. He hasn't got a penny; we can barely keep alive on what we make out of the farm. He couldn't possibly afford a divorce, even if I agreed not to ask for alimony, though I don't see how I could manage without it."

Brenda was speechless. She might have known that something like this would happen in a place like Woodhorn. Divorce . . . alimony . . . the woman must be mad—the man must be mad too. If he had felt all this, why on earth couldn't he have shown it and warned her, instead of tumbling round her like a clumsy sheepdog? Till that moment she had never imagined that he stood in any different position from the number of lightly married men who had rubbed round her feet since she was seventeen. Most of them had been more demonstrative than Greg; but if anyone had uttered the words divorce or alimony in their hearing they would have run straight back to their wives. On the single occasion when one man had been different from the rest she had known that difference at once; her heart had told her.

Mrs. Marlott was still speaking.

" . . . So I'm not asking any terrible sacrifice either of you or of him."

"What are you asking?"

"That you refuse to see him when he comes."

Brenda answered with a touch of malice:

"Wouldn't it be better if he stopped coming?"

Her visitor disarmed her at once.

"I can't stop him. I've tried, but it's no use. That's why I've come to you. You've got hold of him somehow, so you must let him go. If you do that I can do the rest—I love him and I can save him. But you've got to let go. After all, I'm not asking a favour of you—I'm asking for justice. If," she continued in a milder voice, "if you refuse to see him when he calls, or even if you're always out, or engaged . . . he'll take the hint in time."

"Yes, I suppose so."

She envisaged a tiresome fortnight.

"Wouldn't it be better to let him down gently?" she suggested, and thought to herself: This is an unnaturally amiable conversation.

"I think a clean cut would be best," said Mrs. Marlott earnestly. "He'd understand it quicker. If there's any hope, Greg's the sort of man who'll always make the most of it. All his life he's been like that. So it seems to me that it's the first thing that must be taken away."

"Very well. I'll not be at home when he comes this evening."

To her intense surprise Mrs. Marlott burst into tears.

Brenda was embarrassed. She always found emotional displays disquieting and this one was complicated by disturbances in her own heart. She was not sure whether she felt angry or compassionate, whether she wanted to comfort the weeper or push her out of the room. Damn it all! Was this to be her reward for enduring poor old Greg five evenings a week? . . . Enduring him? No, if she was honest she must admit that it had not been all endurance and that probably now she would miss him very much. He had been someone to talk to, someone to spice the tasteless hours. When he was with her she had felt flattered and desired, even if she had also felt bored. Now that she had released him so lightly she saw that she still wanted him—a little. A plague on him and his plain wife! Why had they got to lumber like this through life, talking of love and divorce and alimony? . . . If only their touch on things had been less heavy she might now be promising herself some sort of a kick out of her next meeting with Greg, while getting a very definite kick out of her present encounter with his wife. Instead of which she was giving up something that she would rather have kept, and had been made to feel a beast into the bargain.

Mrs. Marlott dried her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I'm awfully sorry to have made a fool of myself like this. But I never thought you'd be so sweet."

"Sweet . . ."

"Yes. I never thought you'd come like this half way to meet me—give him up so generously—at once. I thought you were quite different."

"I am."

Her words seemed to fly over the woman's head.

"It shows," she continued, polishing her nose with her handkerchief and rubbing her eyes into an even greater redness. "It shows how it's always the best thing to call on people and talk things over face to face. I don't mind telling you that I hated doing it. But I simply had to do something for Greg, since he won't—can't, I mean—help himself. You see, he's never felt anything like this before, and he doesn't know how to manage. He has absolutely no idea how much worse he's making everything for himself and everybody by drifting on, when nothing can come of it. I did what I could to make him realize; but I soon saw that I wasn't being any use. That's why I came to you. You were the only person who could help us. But I never expected you'd do it so quickly . . . or so easily. . . . It's been such a relief! I thought you'd say some dreadful things."

"What things?"

"About wanting him for yourself and not letting him go—telling me that now he's found love I'd be a brute to spoil it for him."

Brenda longed to say: But, my dear lady, do you really think your husband's the sort of man a woman would dig her claws into from any motives except spite or desperation? I'm not yet so situated either way that I need blight two people's lives to keep a dull dog at my feet. Aloud she said:

"But you told me you weren't asking me to send him away as a favour but as an act of justice. Exactly how bad do you think I am?"

"I—I don't think you're bad at all."

"Then why should I insist on keeping him for myself after I've heard what you've told me about your marriage?"

Mrs. Marlott hesitated and looked embarrassed.

"I—I didn't know. I thought—I thought—I wasn't sure, but I thought perhaps you loved him."

Brenda nearly screamed.

"No," she said in a voice made unnaturally soft by refraining. "I don't love him and I'd no idea till you told me that he was in love with me. He didn't show it, you know."

"Didn't he? No—I suppose he mightn't."

"I guessed he was bored and wanted someone to talk to, and I was bored and wanted someone to talk to—so there it was."

Mrs. Marlott looked stern again.

"There was more in it than that. He's told me that he's kissed you."

"What does a kiss matter? It helps a man and woman to talk."

"It meant more than that to Greg."

"I believe you. And I'm trying to tell you that if I'd realized all that I shouldn't have let it—any of it—happen. This is the last moment I'd choose to have anyone seriously in love with me."

"Yes—I know—I mean . . . I hope I haven't said anything to hurt your feelings."

"My feelings are pretty tough by this time, thank you."

"Oh, but I didn't mean. . . ." Mrs. Marlott at once became anxious and flustered. "What I want to convey is that it isn't anything I've heard about *you*. . . . I shouldn't have imagined a thing if Greg himself hadn't told me . . . I never pay any attention to gossip—in fact I took your part against Mrs. . . . and when I saw him sitting here with you yesterday evening I only thought: how nice for him."

"Oh, you saw him sitting here, did you?"

Mrs. Marlott blushed.

"Yes—through the window. I was anxious about him not coming home, and somebody told me his car was outside your door, so as he still didn't come I ran up the lane to make sure; and there he was—looking so happy . . ."

Her voice suddenly broke. She really was incredible.

"And you still didn't think there was anything wrong?" asked Brenda.

"No, not until he came back and told me a lot of lies. You see, it never entered my head for a moment that Greg could do anything like that. It nearly killed me."

Brenda suddenly felt cold, as she saw before her, not the two Marlotts, but herself and Nicky, whom her lies had killed as surely as Greg Marlott's would have killed his wife if she had had aortic disease of the heart.

"Look here," she said abruptly, "I'm sorry."

Mrs. Marlott looked surprised.

"I'm sorry," continued Brenda, "because I know I took risks. I've often taken risks before, but I might have guessed that things would be different in Woodhorn. You can take comfort from the thought that I've done myself no good, either. The whole place is alive with gossip. Mrs. Malpas told me so this morning."

"I hope it won't affect Greg's business. We can't afford that."

"I don't suppose it will. I feel quite sure that he appears in the story only as my victim. I've had a bad name in Woodhorn from the start . . . no doubt you've heard all about me."

Mrs. Marlott hesitated.

"I don't know. I've heard one or two things, of course; but——"

"What things?"

In spite of her scorn, she could not forego the chance of finding out exactly where she stood in local reputation.

"Only your—only about your husband. Somebody told me he—you—you had asked him for a divorce."

This was interesting because untrue.

"I said," continued Mrs. Marlott, "that I thought it honest of you to ask him to divorce you instead of wanting him to be co-respondent—respondent, I mean (I always get them mixed). So many women expect their husbands to do the dirty work for them."

"No doubt they do. But I'm afraid you're paying me a compliment I don't deserve. Divorce may have been mentioned—I believe it was—but we didn't get so far as deciding who was to divorce whom. My husband died before anything could be settled or even talked about."

"Yes—I heard he died very suddenly."

"He had heart disease. I didn't know it—he'd consulted a specialist while I was away and hadn't told me anything about it."

Mrs. Marlott said something which she did not hear. Her mind had switched back to the moment when Nicky slumped at her feet. She closed her eyes, to hide his face which had suddenly filled the room. She wished she had not begun to talk to this woman about these things; and yet somehow—for reasons she could not fathom—she would

rather she knew the facts than followed Woodhorn gossip any further into fancy.

"I loved my husband very much. I don't suppose anyone has told you that. I loved him—but it was more as his daughter than as his wife. He married me when I was only seventeen, and after Lucinda was born he became a sort of father to both of us. I was happy with him, though I flirted like hell, until I'd been married nearly twenty years, when a man came along who made a fool of me."

"But that's exactly what's happened to Greg," cried Mrs. Marlott. Brenda nearly laughed in her simple face.

"I should have thought it was quite different—except for the time we've both been married."

"But that's a very important point—at least, it is to me. I wonder if you'd mind telling me—I mean, what I want to know is—what sort of feeling exactly did you have for your husband before you met this other man? Greg says that what he feels for you is quite different from anything he's ever felt for me. I believe he thinks——" and her voice faltered, while she groped once more for her handkerchief. "It's what makes it all so dreadful—I believe he thinks he's never been really in love with me at all."

"That's nonsense," said Brenda. "A man doesn't live happily with a wife and cleave to her only for twenty years if he hasn't at least been in love with her once. It's different with women; that's why there's no sense in comparing my married life with yours. I was able to live quite happily with my husband, even though I was never really in love with him, and though as I've already told you I flirted like hell most of the time."

She paused. Why on earth was she talking like this to Mrs. Marlott? She did not think the woman was particularly interested in her story, at least only in so far as its details corresponded with the details of her own.

"Oh, do go on . . . that is if you don't mind telling me . . . I don't want to pry into your affairs, but there are things I'd like to know because they'd help me understand Greg . . . this other man—was he married?"

"No."

"Then—excuse me asking—why haven't you married him? . . . I mean, it's over a year, isn't it, since your husband died? And I'm sure if anything happened to *me* . . ."

"When my husband died I never wanted to see the other man again."

"Oh . . ."

She was silent, evidently striving to digest this communication.

"I don't know where he is now," continued Brenda. "Immediately after our quarrel he went to Italy. But he may have come back by this time."

Mrs. Marlott suddenly exclaimed:

"Oh I see . . . you weren't really in love with him after all."

"I certainly was."

"But . . ."

"These things are very difficult to arrange tidily. One loves and one hates . . . the same person—sometimes—often. Anyway, you aren't necessarily happy with the man you love; especially when you feel you've done a murder between you."

"Oh . . . but you can't feel like that."

"I do—sometimes. Not always, I'm glad to say."

"You poor thing."

Once again Brenda closed her eyes. She could feel tears burning in dry ducts. No, she must not—could not cry. She never cried.

Mrs. Marlott's voice seemed to come from very far away.

"But if you didn't know his heart was bad? . . ."

"Even so, I needn't have broken it. But don't worry about me—or about your husband, either. After what I've told you perhaps you can believe that the last thing I want is another serious affair. So thank you for having warned me."

She spoke lightly, wishing to end the interview as she had begun it, on a light note—though in a different key.

"You mustn't thank me," said Mrs. Marlott. "I must thank you. . . . Oh I don't know how to thank you!" She suddenly caught sight of the time. "Why, look at the clock. It's a quarter to four. You said

you could spare me only a few minutes and I've stayed the whole afternoon."

"I was only going into Potcommon and I can go there just as well after tea. It will give me a truthful reason for not seeing your husband if he comes this evening."

"He's sure to come—he practically told me he would. And I really must hurry off now. He might come early, and it would be dreadful if he found me here."

"Dreadful! It would be the best thing that could possibly happen."

Mrs. Marlott's eyes grew round.

"How could it be?"

"It might choke him off to see us together. I warn you that you're still going to have a lot of trouble if you're relying for his cure on the mere fact of his not seeing me for a while."

"It isn't only that. It's knowing you aren't holding him—that I haven't got to fight you for him."

Just as well for you, thought Brenda. She said aloud:

"You've still got to fight his craving for me—that is, if he's really as much in love as you think he is." A sudden, mischievous idea took possession of her mind. "I'm not sure that it wouldn't be better to do something drastic and disillusion him. For instance, if he turned up here and found you and me having tea together and I told him all we'd said about him . . ."

Mrs. Marlott became violently agitated and a loop of hair uncoiled on to her shoulder.

"He'd kill me. At least, I don't mean he'd really kill me—he's not the sort of man to do anything rash—but he'd never forgive me, he'd never speak to me again." She shuddered. "Oh, Mrs. Light, don't suggest such dreadful things. I know they're clever, but clever things don't work with us. Please just do what you said and don't see him when he calls; it doesn't matter whether you're out or in—he'll take your meaning in time, and then I know how to deal with him. He'll be wretched, of course; but I can manage him if he's merely unhappy and wanting something he can't have. Oh please, Mrs. Light, please

promise that you'll never, never let him know that I've been here and told you all this."

She looked so desperate that Brenda rather reluctantly gave up an idea which had begun to please her and which she felt had distinct possibilities.

"Certainly. I promise. If things don't turn out well and you think for any reason we should change our tactics, you can let me know."

"Thank you so much. I will."

She stood up to go. The preposterous interview had come to an end at last.

When Brenda had seen her out of the house, she came back and flopped into her chair. She was utterly exhausted and not at all inclined to drive into Potcommon. She would much rather stay at home and talk to Greg Marlott. It was a pity, she thought, that she should not see him to-day, when for the first time in their acquaintance she would have found him interesting.

PART II

SHINING LIGHT

LUCINDA LIGHT

THE trees by the lane-side still wore some of their leaves as coloured shadows clouding the austere, delicate lines of their branches. Harbolets Shaw was a glowing spark among the extinguished meadows, clashing the fiery brown of its chestnut saplings with the more varied brilliance of Casteye Wood, where maple stood pale as primrose and wild cherry crimson as flame. All the landscape was coloured and clear under a childish blue sky, unlike November—which seemed to live only on the marsh, where the mists hung close to the flooding waters, and underfoot, where the mud oozed over the flints of Ember Lane.

It splashed Lucinda's brogues as she ran down the hill towards Chequers Cottage. She would have a fine dirty pair of shoes to clean this evening—no hope of Mrs. Shafto touching them. It was shoe-cleaning and lamp-trimming and laying the table and answering the door for Lucinda and her mother again. Nan Scallow had not been to work for three days and Mummy said it must be the baby, which meant of course that she could never come back, as it would be impossible to hide a living, bawling baby from Mrs. Shafto. Even if it was kept shut up in Chequers Cottage she was bound to hear of it from someone. Such a mischief could never be hid. It seemed a pity, as Mummy liked Nan and didn't mind the baby.

Lucinda herself did not like Nan, or it might be more correct to say that she felt a little afraid of her. She was likeable enough with her ready smile and obliging manners; she spoke pleasantly in a crooning voice. But these were only surface decorations, silver-paper stars tacked on a fold of the universal darkness. Once Lucinda had dreamed of her looking out of the blind window in the gable-end of Loats, and once

while broad awake she had seen her standing in the midst of a black cloud.

Of course she had said nothing to her mother. Not that it would have made Mummy anxious about Nan, but it would have made her anxious about Lucinda, who never told her when she "saw" things or when she had strange dreams about people. So she had pretended to her mother about Nan Scallow, pretended that she wanted her back (as in a way she did, for it was tiresome doing housework and having Mrs. Shafto give notice once a week). In fact she had offered to run down and inquire for her at Chequers Cottage. It had been Mummy who had at first objected to that.

"People will think it's improper—if there's a baby."

"But perhaps there isn't and anyway no one will know we think there is."

"Mrs. Malpas will. But never mind about that. You're my daughter, not hers, and we can't be more cut by the neighbourhood than we are already. I think I'd better come with you, though."

"Oh, no, Mummy, I'd much rather go alone."

"Sweet child!"

"Well, you know why. You hate walking and you hate visiting cottages and you hate people being ill, and I don't mind any of these things. Besides, I want to see Joan—I can easily run down to Chequers Cottage first and ask at the door. It won't take me a minute. All I'll ask is if she's coming back soon and I don't suppose anyone will mention the baby to a young girl like me."

"Then we shan't know if there is one."

"I'll be able to guess from what they say. Don't worry, I can manage all right, and at least we'll find out if she's coming back or not."

So she had run off quite gaily down the hill, for she wanted to see Joan and she felt curious about Chequers Cottage. She knew the outside well, both as it was now and as it had been two hundred years ago, but she had never been inside it, and she was curious to see how it looked, how much its internal shape of beams and plaster had to tell her of those roistering days that Humfrey Malpas was always

talking about, when it had been the resort of highwaymen. Perhaps he had been as wrong about the Chequers Inn as he had been wrong about Dickory.

Dickory. . . . She wondered if she would ever see him again. She did not want to see him, and for that reason she had not gone again to look at the Old Country through the hedge by Harbolets Shaw. Dickory was something apart from her normal experiences of "sight." He seemed to come from outside rather than from within, and she now felt almost certain that he was "real," in a sense that the other things she saw were not. According to her father's explanation the Old Country that she had seen through the hedge had never had any real existence—it was only a projection of her thinking and her reading into a sort of dissolving view, with just those resemblances and those mistakes that her mind or a book might hold. But Dickory, of whom she had read nothing, thought little, and heard no more than Humfrey's irrelevant legend, must have a very different origin. He also had a very different effect. He made her feel unhappy, anxious—helpless, too; for what can one do to help a ghost? If he was a ghost . . .

There was a part of Ember Lane where the trees of Harbolets Shaw made a tunnel with the trees of Casteye Wood, which spread to the lane to shadow it just above Summer Row. Lucinda nearly always ran at this point—she felt uneasy, as if she might meet something—somebody—here. She never had, but she felt that she might—especially to-day . . . if Dickory really was a ghost . . .

She ran; but almost at once, it seemed, the tunnel curved and opened, and the brightness of the marsh lay spread before her—water and mist with the sun beating down on them, and on sheep-dotted grasslands. In the near foreground, almost like a human figure in the foreground of a landscape painting, stood Chequers Cottage. It was leaning away from the marsh towards the road, the northward slope of the roof increasing the apparent angle of the frontage. No line of it was straight—beams, chimneys, windows, door-posts all sagged and leaned. To Lucinda it looked perilous, as if it must inevitably be pulled down by the great lump of ivy that hung from its roof and seemed to be dragging it forward into the lane.

She found herself disliking it intensely and had to make an effort to walk up to the door under the fading chequer-board. For some time after she knocked there was silence, and her discomfort grew; then noises sounded in the house and came nearer. At last the door was opened by a woman surrounded by small children.

"Good morning," said Lucinda. "I've come to inquire after Nan Scallow. She lives here, doesn't she?"

The woman had not looked friendly, but now she looked definitely hostile.

"No. It's up the stairs," she said, and shut the door so promptly that one of the children, who had strayed forward to examine the visitor, was nearly shut outside.

Lucinda was vexed and a little disquieted. She saw no stairs and for some reason she did not enjoy hanging about Chequers Cottage. She had a mind to give up the attempt and tell her mother she could not get in; and then either they would let things be or else come down reassuringly together some other time. But the next moment, just as she stepped back into the lane, she caught sight of the stairs—a wooden flight, rather like the steps that lead to the drying floor of an oast-house—running up the west wall of the cottage to a door just under the roof. That must be Nan Scallow's door, and as she had come after her she had better go up and inquire. Besides, in spite of her uneasiness, she still wanted to see inside the cottage.

She walked up and knocked on the door. This door seemed even more silent than the other. She waited quite a while for steps, but none came. She knocked a second time without result. Perhaps no one was there. Perhaps Nan was not ill at all, but away for some other reason. Lucinda wondered if she should give up the attempt, but felt unwilling to leave without at least a glance inside. Perhaps the door wasn't locked. . . . She turned the handle and found that it was not, so after knocking a third time out of politeness, just in case anyone was there, she pushed it open and walked in.

She found herself in the dirtiest, most untidy room she had ever seen. It seemed full of old clothes and broken furniture and had a revolting smell. There were plenty of beams, dripping with dirty

cobwebs, but the plaster was nearly all gone from the walls, displaying ugly gaps of lathe and board. Was this where Nan Scallow lived? The home from which she came every morning looking so neat and clean? It seemed incredible and she had much better not say anything to Mummy about it.

She felt a growing distaste, rising almost to nausea—a distaste as much of the soul as of the body—and turned to go. As she did so she came into collision with a small table which immediately collapsed. The next moment a voice came from behind a door which she had hitherto taken for a cupboard.

"That you, Mother?"

So Nan must be in the next room.

"No, it's me," Lucinda said politely and opened the door.

The inner room was better furnished and altogether brighter than the outer one; but for some reason it made her feel worse. Nan lay in the midst of a great bed, with coloured curtains knotted into a curious, old-fashioned crown above it. Her black hair was spread like a cloud over rather an unclean pillow, and her arms lay out on the rose-coloured quilt. Her shoulders were bare—she evidently did not wear a nightgown.

"Oh, it's you, Missy," and she pulled up the quilt to her neck.

"I came to ask how you were," said Lucinda. "When you didn't come we wondered if you were ill."

"I'm better now," said Nan. "I've been terrible ordinary, but I'm better now."

Lucinda had an impulse to bolt out of the room, but now she was there she felt she must stay and find out what her mother chiefly wanted to know.

"We don't want to hurry you, of course, but my mother would like to have some idea as to when you're coming back."

"I'll be all right again in a few days. It's one of those flues, Missy, and I'd better stay away till I gets over it."

"Oh, yes, of course. We don't want to hurry you. I only just came to inquire."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," said Nan pleasantly.

She looked ill, her cheeks had fallen in and she seemed years older than three days ago. It must have been a very bad attack indeed. Lucinda felt sorry for her.

"Is there anything I can do? Anything I can get for you? You look too ill to be left alone."

"Oh, Mother looks after me. I live with her down here. She's gone to the shop now to buy some good things for me, but she's seldom away long."

Judging by the state of things Lucinda did not think that Mrs. Scallow could be a very good nurse.

"Would you like Mrs. Shafto to make you some soup?"

"No, thank you, Missy. Mother makes gorgeous soup."

"Well, I'd better be going now." She felt that if she stayed any longer she wouldn't be able to breathe. The room seemed to be filling with something—something she couldn't see. Then suddenly she noticed through the window, which was set very low in the wall, a woman digging in the garden behind the house.

"There's your mother digging in the garden," she said without thinking at all.

Nan started up in bed, so suddenly agitated that she forgot about the bedclothes, and Lucinda saw her breasts, unexpectedly large and terrifying.

"I tell you my mother's gone up to the shop." She looked out into the garden. "There's nobody there at all."

"Yes, there is—over there by the shed. But I made a mistake—she can't be your mother; she's quite a young girl."

Now she came to think of it she had never seen Mrs. Scallow, so could not have recognized her. She wondered why she had felt so certain it was Nan's mother that she had seen digging in the garden. It might have been anyone, for obviously the Scallows were not the only occupiers of Chequers Cottage.

Nan had fallen back on her pillow; she took no interest in the girl whom Lucinda was still watching.

"I believe she's burying something."

"What could she be burying? You ain't allowed to bury things in

Christian gardens. That must be Mrs. Norrup digging up her turnips." Once more she started up in agitation. "I can't see anyone."

This time she was right. Mrs. Norrup or whoever it was had vanished—no doubt into the shed. Lucinda felt rather ashamed of herself for having been so interested in her—there seemed now no reason for it. But though she was no longer interested she still felt distressed, almost ill. She had a strange feeling that it was night and not day.

"Well, I must be going. I'll tell my Mother you'll be back in about a week."

"Before a week, I expect, Missy. I tell you there's nothing the matter but the flues."

"You're sure you don't want us to send you down some soup or anything like that?"

"No, thank you, Missy. Mother's buying me good healthy soup at the shop."

Lucinda felt that she had done her duty and could escape at last. Escape was the word. She felt a desperate need to run from that queer, coloured room, from the garden view through the window placed monstrously at her feet, from Nan's brown, sick, anxious body and her cloud of hair—the black cloud in which she lived. She opened the door and went out, but in her agitation she must have opened a different door from the one she had entered by, though she had not noticed that there were two doors in the room. She found herself at the head of a short flight of stairs leading down into the house.

She would not go back. There must be a way out down these stairs.

She ran down and opening another door at the bottom, found herself in a large, low-ceilinged room, which seemed at the first glance full of people and smoke. A big wood fire on the hearth was smoking badly and she noticed with some interest that nearly everyone in the room had a clay churchwarden pipe.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I've been up to see Nan Scallow and came out the wrong way by mistake."

Nobody answered or took the slightest notice. She went forward a few steps into the room, and then suddenly was struck all at once by a

number of strange things. The light did not come from the window but from candles set on small tables, round which sat groups of farm labourers, smoking and drinking beer. She was surprised to see that they all wore round frocks, for she did not know that any survived in Woodhorn. Then a girl appeared from somewhere, carrying a tray with tankards of beer on it, and Lucinda at once recognized her as the girl she had seen digging in the garden and had at first so strangely mistaken for Mrs. Scallow. She was not a pretty girl, her mouth was too large and her face had a coarse, impudent look which was not attractive. She wore a cap on her head, which Lucinda thought ridiculous, and incredibly clumsy shoes. She took no more notice than anyone else of the stranger.

It looked as if Chequers Cottage was still some sort of inn; but there was a queer, unnatural feeling about the room and its inmates, which Lucinda realized must be due to their complete silence. Nobody spoke a word—at least she could not hear a word spoken, though heads seemed to wag together over the pipes and beer. And now she came to think of it those clumsy shoes the girl wore were entirely noiseless. . . . She felt frightened as she crossed the floor . . . then suddenly outside the window a lantern swung, and looking out she saw standing at the door one of those long, boat-shaped wagons that belonged to the Old Country.

Her skin crept.

So that was what had happened. She was no longer a spectator, but a part of her own dream . . . hallucination . . . vision . . . whatever it was. She felt utterly confused and helpless. What could she do, since she was in a dream? She seemed still to have some power over herself, as she walked across the floor, her steps as noiseless as the waiting-maid's. She was going out—as quickly as she could. What would she find outside?

She hesitated, stopping in the middle of the room. She suddenly felt afraid of going out. The door did not, she could see, lead straight into the road, but into a passage. She had better not go into that passage. Perhaps, as it was a dream, she could get out some other way. She might be able to *will* herself into the road. She felt that she could

will herself to make a noise and immediately heard the stamp of her foot on the boards.

"Can't you hear me?" she called to the surrounding company, and then immediately felt afraid in case they could. It was like those dreams in which you try to do things to make yourself wake up, and then find that you have only pulled the dream into a yet more horrible shape. She watched their faces anxiously in case they changed.

Nothing happened, however; that is, nothing happened in the room. But she had a curious sensation that something was happening outside the window. She moved towards it, both attracted and repelled, and found that she was face to face with Dickory.

He was looking in, so closely that his features almost touched the pane.

"Wheesh," he said in a low voice. "Is she in dere?"

Lucinda found herself saying:

"If you mean the maidservant, she's just gone out of the room."

"Oi mun see her," he muttered. "Oi mun see her näow."

His voice was not unlike the voice of the farm workers round Woodhorn, but so broadened and thickened as to be almost incomprehensible. She noticed that he wore a tattered coat of some dark, fustian material, and enormously thick cord breeches, gaitered from the knees. So much for Humfrey Malpas's purple velvet and spade-guinea buttons.

"Oi mun see her," he repeated, and Lucinda realized then that though his words were almost a foreign language, his voice was clear enough. The pane of glass between them did not seem to matter at all. The next moment this was accounted for by the fact that he was standing beside her in the room. She felt like someone who has made rather an absurd mistake.

"Can 'ee help me?" he asked wildly. "Can 'ee help me?"

"Perhaps she's gone up upstairs. If you go through that door you may find her."

"Dere äun't no door—'tis gone—'tis arl chäanged. Dat's wot queers me so about dis pläace—'tis arl chäanged."

Lucinda looked behind her and saw that he spoke the truth. There

was no door. The only door in the room besides that opening into the passage was one that obviously led into the garden—it was ajar and she could see the daylight through it. There was daylight outside the window, too, the pale blue, sunny day she had left behind her when she climbed up the stairs to visit Nan. No boat-shaped wagon stood in the lane—she looked clear across its emptiness to the tarred, wooden front of Summer Row.

She might well have joined her complaint with Dickory's—" 'tis arl chäanged"—except that it would have been no complaint. She was intensely relieved to find that the Chequers Inn and its inhabitants had disappeared. She stood in an ordinary cottage kitchen, with a kettle boiling on the hob and four small, dirty children crawling about the floor. It was all sunny, stuffy, cosy and reassuring. Of Dickory, strangely enough, she now felt no fear at all.

"No, you're right," she said, feeling that she must be as matter-of-fact as possible, "it's gone. But if you go up the outside staircase you'll get to the top floor. . . ." She broke off, realizing that under restored conditions he would probably see nobody but Nan Scallow.

He mumbled: "Oi mun find my poor Moll."

"Oh. . . ." A startling thought occurred to her. "Do you mean Moll Kemp?"

"Surelye. Oi mun tell her de hornies is arter her säum as arter me. But Oi cäan't find her nowheres. 'Tis arl chäanged."

His voice rose in a great and sudden cry. Till then Lucinda could not have told if either of them had been audible to anyone but themselves; but now his voice seemed to tear the veils of time and space that surrounded them, and to shatter like a blow on glass the common atmosphere of the room. One of the children, whom she had quite forgotten while she was talking to Dickory, suddenly looked up and screamed with fright. The others too began to yell, and immediately a woman came running into the room from the garden—the same woman who had opened the front door when Lucinda had knocked at it.

"I beg pardon, miss, but haven't you found Nan Scallow's room? She doesn't live her."

She seemed offended and Lucinda began to apologize.

"I'm sorry. I've seen her all right, but I took the wrong door out of her room and found myself down here. This place is very confusing."

"I saw you come in from the garden a moment ago."

Then for the first time Lucinda distinctly remembered coming in from the garden. She had turned into it without thinking, at the bottom of the outside steps, and finding herself close to an open door at the back of the house had decided to walk through it to the lane. Her head swam. For a moment she seemed to have two distinct sets of memories, then gradually but swiftly one set faded and became the memory of a dream.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, "I wasn't thinking where I was going. This is the way out, isn't it?" and she walked towards the passage door.

"Yes, that's the way out," said the woman grimly.

The children had stopped bawling and Dickory had completely disappeared. As she walked through the passage door Lucinda found herself wondering if he had ever been there.

Then suddenly, as she shut the door behind her and found herself enclosed in darkness between two doors, she met him again—this time only as a voice. She heard him say—in her own head, it seemed:

"Who's dat 'ooman? Oi'm allus of a seeing of her aräound heres, but she äun't nobody Oi knows."

"She lives here. There's a number of people living in this house."

"Surelye; but näun of 'em's de föakses Oi know. Tell me, whur are de föakses Oi know?"

Lucinda shook her head sadly—her head with his pleading voice inside it.

"I can't tell you. I don't know the folks you know."

Her heart ached for him. He seemed so hopelessly confused and lost. . . . She wondered if he knew he had been dead two hundred years . . .

Then suddenly he asked her:

"Who are you?"

It was a natural question, and she would never have thought that she could find it so difficult to answer.

"I—I—my name's Lucinda Light; I live at Woodhorn Parsonage." He shook his head.

"Mus' Williams lives at de Parsonage. He promised to larn Oi a prayer; but reckon Oi've never bin able to git so far."

"Do you," Lucinda ventured, "do you live here? At the Chequers Inn, I mean?"

"Naw—reckon Oi've lived nowheres in particular sinst Oi come away from Loats."

"Loats! Do you come from Loats?"

"Surelye. Oi wur de looker boy at Loats."

"Then it isn't true? You aren't a highwayman at all!"

Here was news for Humfrey Malpas and the Antiquarian Society.

"Highwayman?" He seemed perplexed. "Dat's hightoby, Oi reckon. Naw, Oi äun't no hightobyman. A poor lad wot täakes a purse on foot mun't näame hisself wud de hightoby captuns."

"So you do take purses?"

"Oi mun live, säum as odder föakses."

"You don't do lookering any more?"

"Naw. Sinst all dat terrification Oi'd starve if Oi dudn't täake a purse näow and agäun."

"I see," said Lucinda politely. But there were a great many things she still did not see clearly.

"Do you—do you ever go to Loats?" she asked him.

"Loats! Naw, Oi dursn't. Dey'd kill Oi if Oi went, and if dey 'oodn't Oi'm scared o' Mus' Rowfold."

"Who's Mus' Rowfold?"

"My mäaster . . . my mäaster." The voice in her head became agonized. "Him wot Oi shot dead de marnun arter Christmas Day."

Lucinda felt herself once more afraid. The fear did not seem to come from her relations with Dickory—from this isolation with him in the cupboard of her thoughts. It seemed to come from the gable end of Loats, from the little dead window high up in the point of the roof.

"Oh, Dickory," she cried, and as she cried she knew that her voice was as soundless as his, speaking in her brain only, like those voices that talk in unfinished sentences on the verges of sleep. "Oh Dickory, why had you——"

"Because of de liddle Missus."

"But why . . ."

"'E wur crool and unkind—she wept in her apron. . . ."

Lucinda knew that she was waking up . . . daylight was coming through the blind—no, for she was in the little dark passage at Chequers Cottage, where she had been for long ages talking to Dickory. It was growing light—the woman in the kitchen must have opened the door, wondering why she was still there. . . . She could see a wallpaper pattern of trees, a delicate design of green and brown with a background of tender blue—most exceptional wallpaper for such a cottage . . . not wallpaper at all, but the tracery of Harbolets Shaw against the sky—flat, as in a design, not living . . . now suddenly alive . . . and she herself awake, walking briskly into the mouth of Loats Farm Lane.

. . . Her footsteps flagged as full awareness returned, making her head spin. So this was where she had been all the time—no, not all the time, but for the last ten minutes at least, while she thought she was in the passage of Chequers Cottage, talking to Dickory. . . . She began to feel giddy and sat down on a lane-side bank of dry, dead leaves. She must think, clear up the jumble in her memory, before she went on to the farm.

Once more she had the consciousness of two memories, shouting against each other. One was entirely normal and practical, the other was strange and rather alarming. She could remember so clearly walking out of the kitchen into the passage and then out of the front door into the lane—yes, and she remembered how half way up the hill a rabbit had dashed across from the hedge, almost at her feet. She remembered all that, and yet she also remembered what seemed an age of darkness, with Dickory talking in her head.

Already that second memory was beginning to fade, as the most vivid dream will fade. If she did not want to lose it she must try to

hold back at least a part until she had set it in the mould of her waking thoughts. What had Dickory said about Moll Kemp? . . . And who was "de liddle Missus"? . . . and he had spoken of Mus' Rowfold . . . That was probably someone who lived at Loats in olden days . . . and he had shot him dead on the morning after Christmas Day—because he had been unkind to "de liddle Missus" . . . perhaps she was his wife. . . . Anyway, out of the story emerged no dashing highwayman, no purple-coated captain on a black mare, but a poor yokel in fustian and corduroy, a looker turned footpad and cutpurse. Was that really Dickory—the ghost of Ember Lane? . . . Perhaps Humfrey Malpas's highwayman was the real ghost and the Dickory she had seen and spoken to only a sort of personal dream—something in her head—a part of illusion. . . . She could not tell.

For the first time she felt depressed as well as frightened. If to-day's experience really was an illusion, she must be ill—on the verge of madness, perhaps; for never had any illusion been so actual, so convincing. It stood out, entirely different, from anything she had experienced before. She longed for comfort, for counsel—to tell . . . to ask. . . . Why was there nobody whom she could ask or tell? when only a year ago there had been somebody who would have understood everything, explained everything. . . . Oh, Daddy, Daddy, I can't go on like this much longer without you—needing you so much. Why can't I ever see *you*? Talk to *you*? Why are you more dead than Dickory?

There was no answer in the wood. She rose hurriedly from her seat of fallen leaves and walked out into the sunshine, where an open downy field spread over the hill-side towards Loats Farm. She could hear somebody whistling in the Shaw behind her. The voice, as it drew near, seemed to mock the world with its untuneful gaiety.

HARRY COBSALE

HARRY COBSALE pushed his bicycle into the lane through Harbolets Shaw. He had been over to Idolsfold to see his tegs, some of which were developing liver fluke on water-logged pasture. He had arranged with Strudgate's looker to drench them all, but he was angry with Strudgate because he was angry with himself for having sent them there. Richard's tegs were doing well at Waxend, where the land was lighter; it was those heavy clay meadows at Idolsfold—the Randiddles they were called—which were bad for stock in winter. If he hadn't hated Richard and his butcher-graziers he would have thought of that before Michaelmas.

Apart from this set-back, his affairs were not going too badly. It seemed that at last he had shaken off Nan Scallow. Having won what she wanted off him in the shape of a "character" she had apparently decided to let him alone. Certainly it did not look as if she meant to claim him as her child's father. She had lately been going about the village saying that there wasn't going to be a child at all and that she'd have the law on chaps who went about miscalling a poor girl. The grosser part of Woodhorn had laughed sceptically and immoderately, but some among them must have shared Harry's relief. She might be lying, but her lie showed plainly that she did not intend to father her brat on anybody—no doubt she had come to despair of any court's award. And now the last rumour of all was that she had had it and her old mother had given it to the gipsies. That made things brighter still.

So in spite of his superficial annoyance about the tegs, he pushed his bicycle between the ruts feeling fundamentally satisfied. His relief was not all material—deliverance from a legal and financial threat. It lay also in the removal of a conflict from his life—the conflict he himself

had started when he had run away to hide in the darkest thing he could find from the brightness of Richard's Joan. He had for a time belonged to Nan because Joan could not belong to him; but now that Nan had released her hold he felt free and gay, because he belonged to neither of them. He was free to strut before Joan and proclaim his independence of her as well as of Nan. The only drawback was that owing to the absence of speech between them she probably knew nothing about it. She would not know why he was strutting and spreading his tail. Never mind; he'd find a way to show her.

The lane, though deeply rutted at the sides, was hard and smooth in the middle. When he came to where the slope of it ended he mounted his bicycle and rode whistling through the Shaw. Just beyond the edge of it he overtook a girl—Lucinda Light. He recognized her from several yards away by her height and the roll of golden hair above her collar. He did not particularly want to speak to her but he did not see that he could very well pass her without doing so; besides, he felt at the moment ready to exhibit himself to almost any girl.

"Good morning," he said, dismounting.

She seemed startled, as if suddenly waked out of a dream. Queer sort she was; he wondered what she and Joan talked about.

"Good morning," she said politely.

"Going to see Joan?"

"Yes; I haven't been round for a long time."

"Well, you might tell her from me that she's a very pretty girl and I don't see why she should never speak to me just because she's married to my brother."

She looked at him seriously.

"You know I could never tell her that."

He thought her a mug, but a pretty one. Her roll of hair was like a wreath of buttercups round her head—he wondered how she had made it look like that. She was nicely dressed too in a big tartan coat—very much a lady, he thought. But he did not like her—she was queer, and he could not like her.

"Well," he said, feeling inclined to plague her a bit, "I don't see

why you shouldn't. What do girls talk about when they're alone together?"

"Joan and I talk about all sorts of things. But I don't know her well enough to talk about——"

She broke off. He was opening the farm gate for her to go through.

"Talk about what?"

"About you and your brother Richard not talking to each other."

Something in her voice disconcerted him, almost made him feel abashed. It was not disapproval—that would only have made him swaggering and defiant—but a kind of sorrow which for the moment mysteriously he shared.

"We seem to be talking a lot about talk," he said and laughed uneasily. "But you still haven't told me what you and Joan talk about."

"I have told you—all sorts of things."

"All sorts? What sorts?"

"Oh, clothes, the films in Marlingate, the serial in *Good Housekeeping*—things like that."

"I see."

He found it difficult to imagine her talking of such commonplace, chattering sort of things.

"Do you ride a bike?" he asked irrelevantly.

"No. I don't think I should care for it. I like walking."

They were crossing the first of the two great open meadows between Harbolets Shaw and the farm. He began to feel discouraged at the thought of the long way they still had to go together. He would have liked to mount his bicycle and ride on ahead. It was awkward walking and talking like this—embarrassing—not a bit like walking with a girl. He wished that he could take leave of her, but did not see how he could. Then quite suddenly she asked:

"Isn't there supposed to be a ghost haunting Ember Lane?"

What a fool question!

"I've heard there is, but I don't believe it."

"Why not?"

"I don't believe in ghosts."

"Oh . . . I've been told that it's the ghost of a highwayman—a man called Dickory."

Harry laughed. He was greatly amused.

"When I was a little chap we had an old woman about the place and if ever I terrified her she'd say: 'Dickory'ull get you. Mark my words, Dickory'ull get you.' But this is the first I've heard about his being a highwayman."

"Humfrey Malpas told me he was a highwayman and that Chequers Cottage used to be a sort of headquarters for highwaymen, when it was an inn."

"I never heard of that, neither. But Chequers Cottage was an inn all right. You can see the chequer-board sign still over the door."

"Isn't it supposed to be haunted too?"

"I dunno. These are just old wives' tales. But talking of Chequers Cottage," tossing his voice with deliberate carelessness, "how's that girl Nan Scallow getting on at your house?"

"Very well. That's to say she works well and my mother likes her. But she's been away ill for the last three days."

Harry looked at her intently.

"That's hard luck. I hope she'll be back soon."

"Oh, yes—she said she'd be back at the end of the week."

Of course a diddicoy would get over that sort of thing very quickly.

"I've just been down to see her," continued the girl.

"You've seen her!"

Harry was aghast. The conventional man in him—of whom, in spite of his freedoms he had a considerable survival—was outraged by the thought of this young lady going into the harlot's house. It was an outrageous thing. She must be a fool and her mother something worse.

"Yes; we heard nothing for three days, and Mrs. Shafto—that's our cook—was beginning to get worked up; so I went to inquire. I'm glad I did, as we were afraid she might have left us for good."

"Do you know what's the matter with her?"

He asked the question boldly, wondering what she had meant when she said they were afraid that Nan might have left them for good.

"She said she had 'flu. It must have been a very bad attack. She looked dreadful."

Something in her voice silenced him. He said no more. He was sufficiently loutish in his mind to feel awkward with a girl who was not quite of his own sort—who was, moreover, difficult to talk to in spite of her occasional fluency. As he walked silently beside her for the last fifty yards of Loats drive he thought to himself that she was not really pretty, in spite of her golden hair. She had not the right sort of face to go with it. It was too long and her skin was pale—not unhealthy, just pale like cream. Besides, she was much too tall.

If there was one thing at Loats which Harry was tremendously proud of it was his milking machine. He called it his, though technically it was his and Richard's joint possession, because it was his victory that had bought it. He had fought Richard for weeks over the Bronson Milker—fought and won. That was the actual fight which had divided Loats into two uncommunicating armies.

Richard had disliked the idea of a petrol machine—wait till the electricity came down Ember Lane, he had said in the days when he still spoke to his brother. Harry had retorted that they would have to wait for years before that happened; perhaps it would never happen at all. Well then, said Richard, never mind—cows had been milked for thousands of years without machinery and Chodd still had his hands. He'd rather have no machine at all than a petrol one, which would scare the cows and affect their yield. Harry had answered that the cows would soon get used to it, and if Loats wanted to register as a Grade A milk farm they had better have something more up to date than Chodd about the place.

The matter had been settled by a sale at Clearhedge where, owing to the slump and the farm's difficulties, a lot of nearly new machinery had gone at fancifully low prices. Harry had taken the law into his own hands and had bid for the Bronson on the second day of the sale. Even Richard had seen it was a bargain, though he had refused to speak to his brother ever since. The machine was in good condition

and Harry had been right about the cows—they had very soon got used to it. On the other hand it did not always milk them dry and they often had to be finished by Chodd.

It was also extremely noisy, but as this did not affect the cows Harry did not consider it a drawback. On the contrary, the sound, proclaiming his victory over Richard and advertising the mechanical milking at Loats to the surrounding country-side, was music in his ears and nearly always drew him to the cow-lodge, where Chodd played the rather disapproving part of mechanized farm-hand among mixed odours of cows and petrol. This morning, in the Morgay field, he no sooner heard the distant whirr and thump than he wound up the conversation he was having with Backreed about the Idolsfold tegs and strolled off towards the farm.

In the great dim cow-lodge the noise was deafening and the air fummy. At first he neither heard nor saw the two girls standing together by Blossom's stall. When he saw them he hesitated, but not for long. This was a very good time to tease them both, for they would be embarrassed by each other's presence and unable to meet him openly. Nor would Joan be able to leave him abruptly and march off into the house, as was her wont when he drew near. For a moment he watched them, talking to each other, unaware of his presence, then he threw back his shoulders and marched towards them, as a cock might strut towards a couple of hens.

Owing to the noise they did not see him till he had almost reached them and imprisoned them between Blossom's flank and his own body. They started and Joan drew herself up, but Lucinda turned to him and smiled. Then she lifted her voice above the racket.

"Joan brought me in here to see your wonderful machine."

"Handy thing, ain't it?"

He spoke almost faintly, for he was startled. It startled him to find Joan displaying the machine that Richard would scarcely look at. A gap between them there. . . . He felt obscurely flattered and delighted. He had never imagined for a moment that she admired his Bronson milker; and yet she must admire it or she wouldn't be showing it to Lucinda—they wouldn't both be standing there to watch it working

and making too much noise for them to talk of the chattering things they talked about when they were together.

"She says the cows don't mind a bit," continued Lucinda.

"No more they do," said Harry, "though every now and again you'll find one as does, I'm told."

All the time he watched Joan, but she was not looking at him. She leaned against the stall, gazing intently at the mechanized cow, her arms folded across her cherry-coloured pinafore beneath her breast, where shadows moved lightly with her breathing. Her hair was spun of shadows and the faint light that hung in the barn, and shadows marked her eyes as they looked downwards, and her lashes lay like shadows upon her cheek. Harry suddenly felt his throat tighten with a sort of pity. Her approval of his machine gave him no sense of triumph, but rather of pity for her who must ever since she came have admired it secretly and separately.

"Has Joan showed you how it works?" he asked.

"No. We asked your man one or two questions, but I don't think he quite likes us being here."

"I don't suppose he does. But I'll show you—it's simple enough."

He explained the machine to them and they both listened though only Lucinda spoke. He felt in his heart that she wanted him to think well of Joan, and that though she had refused to persuade her to offend Richard by speaking to Harry she wanted to change the atmosphere of hate between them. A little while ago he might have resented this, but now the thought of it pleased him, coupled as it was with his discovery of Joan's interest in his machine. He began to see her at last as something not wholly Richard's; and again it was not triumph but pity that crept closer to his heart as he thought of her joining perhaps unwillingly in his brother's campaign of enmity and silence. She would have liked to be friends if loyalty did not compel her to be otherwise. Poor little Joan . . . poor little missus . . . no doubt she hated the silent life she was made to lead. For the first time he saw her marriage to Richard as something more than a personal outrage on Richard's brother Harry.

"These things," he said, "go better by electricity. But as we'd have

to wait five years at least for the electricity to come to Loats, it seemed better to get a petrol one when we had the chance."

"Of course," said Joan. He could not swear that he heard her voice above the rattle of the machine, but he clearly saw the words form themselves on her lips.

He did not see her again till the evening, when coming into the kitchen alone to a late tea he unexpectedly found her sewing by the lamp. She took no notice of his entrance, for it was not part of Loats' method of warfare for either side to acknowledge the other even by so much as a withdrawal, unless some special act of aggression made it necessary. Harry shouted into the scullery for his tea and sat down at the table, more disturbed by her presence than she appeared to be by his.

Neither of them said a word while he waited for Mrs. Cobsale to make the tea and bring it in. Then when his mother was in the room he spoke to her desultorily about the farm and the weather. As a rule the combatants at Loats were particularly garrulous when talking to their own side, if only to emphasise their silence towards the enemy. But Harry was neither very communicative nor very attentive to his mother this evening, and felt glad when at last she went away to attend to some of her remoter affairs. He was now full of his desire to go further on the trail that he had so surprisingly started this morning.

"I'm glad," he said, breaking almost violently into the silence, "that you like my Bronson milker."

She did not speak for so long that he was afraid that, after all, she never would. Then suddenly she said:

"I think it's a useful machine, but I don't want to talk about it."

Her cold little voice exasperated him into a sort of angry banter.

"You mean you don't want to talk about it to *me*."

"I mean I don't want to talk about it to anyone."

"No; Richard wouldn't like to talk about it either."

She made no reply and her silence was now a challenge that it had not been before.

"But you liked talking about it to your friend," he plunged on. "You were even keen enough to show it to her."

"I'm sorry I did. I'm sorry you found us."

He was making her speak, and his anger suddenly left him.

"Don't be sorry. I enjoyed explaining it to you both. I liked feeling, if only for five minutes, that you didn't hate me."

"I don't hate you. But I'm not going to talk to you, so please let me alone."

She stood up, gathering her sewing things into a bag.

"Don't go," he said.

But she was determined; though unfortunately, not expecting him, she had settled herself so elaborately that her going took some time. He noticed, too, that her hands were shaking and fumbling. Poor little thing! she was nervous. A reel of cotton slipped out of her fingers and rolled under the table. He made a dive for it, but she dashed forward to get it first and before either knew what had happened their heads came together in a sharp crack.

"Oh. . . ."

For a moment they crouched, blinking at each other, dazed, uncertain. Then suddenly they both laughed.

"I'm sorry," said Harry, straightening, "that was my fault."

"No, it was mine. Have I hurt you?"

"Not a bit. I've a good thick head. But how about you?"

"Oh, I'm all right."

They smiled, almost easily. After such a concussion, it seemed forced and unnatural to retreat into the old stiffness. But he saw with some disappointment that she was still on her way out of the room.

"Why are you going? Just because I'm here? I'll be gone in a minute."

She murmured something about having to go upstairs.

"And after this you're never going to speak to me again?"

She looked at him narrowly, and, he thought, sadly.

"You know I can't."

"Because of Richard."

"Yes, of course—because of Richard. And because of you."

He was startled.

"Why because of me?"

"Because when I first came you sneered at me. You were horrible. I tried to be pleasant at first, though I didn't speak to you. I tried to be pleasant to you all. I hoped that the quarrel would blow over and that then we'd all find we liked one another. The others weren't so bad—Daisy and Mrs. Cobsale; they just took no notice. But you—you mocked at me, you made me feel ashamed of my good feelings, and I knew that Richard was right when he said you were the cad of the family."

"He said that, did he?"

"Yes, and in next to no time you proved it."

She seemed to have forgotten to leave the room, but stood just inside the door, away from the lamp, so that all of her was dim except her coloured pinafore and her eyes, which her own words seemed to have set alight.

"How did I prove it?" he asked, still curiously without anger.

"By going with that woman."

He felt stabbed. Somehow he had not thought of her knowing, certainly not of her caring. He had gone with Nan Scallow to outrage and mortify his brother and to stifle something that was tormenting his own soul; but he had never pictured the effect of his action on her, the spring of it. He answered awkwardly:

"I don't go with her any more."

"No, but you went with her; you were able to take up with a pikey girl. And that would have shown me you were what Richard said you were even if you hadn't shown me already."

He could not bear to let the silence come down over them again while she thought like this of him.

"Look here," he said, rising from the table, but coming no closer, "look here. You must listen to me. It ain't fair to think of me like this. I went with Nan Scallow and I mocked at you—if you call it mocking, but I didn't mean it for that—I did it all for the same reason. I was mad, just about mad when Richard brought you here and I saw how pretty you were." The words limped off his tongue, because he

had not many of them and called them up with difficulty. Even while he said "pretty" it seemed inadequate for the light and sweetness that had tormented him; but he could think of no other word to describe a girl. "I don't mean I was jealous in the ordinary way. I was angry," again a weak, limping word, "because Richard had something better than anything I'd ever seen. So I did things I thought would annoy him. So I went with Nan and winked at you."

That was all he could say, and he knew that his words were miserably inadequate and as commonplace as the cracking together of their skulls a few minutes ago. If only they could have brought about as good a feeling . . . but when she answered he realized that she had understood him only in part.

"I see," she said slowly. "It wasn't me you hated—it was Richard."

"No more than he hates me."

Then to his consternation she began to cry.

"Joan . . . don't cry."

He moved towards her, but stopped when she flung out her hand as if to strike him.

"How can I help crying?" she gasped. "This is a dreadful house—full of hate. Sometimes I can feel murder in it. Oh, why do you hate him so? He's done you no harm. It isn't his fault that your father left the farm to him as well as to you."

"He could have sold out and gone."

"Why should he? And why didn't you?"

"I'm the eldest son. I've a right to be here."

She said nothing, but began to dry her eyes.

"He'd no business to bring you here and upset you," he continued, "things being as they are. He might have known you'd be miserable with all this going on around you."

"He wanted me all the more because his own mother and brother had turned against him. I'm glad he brought me here, even if it makes me unhappy sometimes."

Once more he felt pity moving uncomfortably in his heart; but with it this time came a hatred of Richard that almost choked him.

"Look here," he said, "wouldn't it make things easier for you if you and me was friendly—spoke to each other sometimes?"

"No," and he saw shadows move behind her, as she opened the door. "No," she repeated with her hand on the latch. "I'm not going to speak to you again after this. I'm glad we've spoken, for we've cleared up a few things; but I'm not going against Richard for the sake of a brother who's treated him the way you have."

She had flicked up some of his old bravado.

"Well, smile at me sometimes—I promise not to mock."

The shadows behind her yawned and swallowed her up.

JESS MARLOTT

JESS MARLOTT straightened her back and sighed. Her sigh had started in the troubled depths of her mind, but with the movement it became an expression of bodily pain. For a minute she stood half-bent, gripping her side with both hands. It was worse than ever . . . and she had really thought Green Kelloids were doing her good; this was the first time she had felt anything since she started taking them. If they weren't going to put her right she would have to give them up, as they were extremely expensive—dearer than that other thing she had tried first. . . . Perhaps she ought to go and see a doctor. But a doctor would be sure to tell her to rest; and how was she to rest? . . . Also you could buy quite a lot at the chemist's for one doctor's fee. She didn't want to pay five shillings to be told to do what she couldn't. No, she'd wait till she had finished the Green Kelloids, anyway; she hadn't really given them a chance.

The pain was gone, and with its going her body and mind—her whole life—seemed to change. She no longer thought of seeing the doctor or doubted the promises of patent medicine. Her body became upright, relaxed, and once more conscious of heatless sunshine in the two-acre field. At the same time her mind fell back into the pit of anxious sorrow where it had been lost all the morning. Her release from pain had brought only a change of evils, not a respite. Her body and mind were like two buckets in a well—when one came up the other went down, and she did not know when she was worse off.

She moved on to the next ark. She was cleaning them out, while Greg did the houses. Up till a fortnight ago the work had been done by Woodsell, to whom her husband had paid a weekly twelve shillings which must now be saved. It was Jess herself who had suggested the

economy. She had not had a very high opinion of Woodsell; but now, having done part of his work for a fortnight, she felt less critical. Either he was a model of pluck and industry or else—as on the whole she thought more likely—his bodily construction was quite different from hers.

One of the least pleasant contrasts between poultry and general farming was the difficulty in feeling any sort of personal affection for the stock. She remembered how she had loved the beasts on other farms, some more, some less, but always with a certain individual warmth. When she had cried over the death of old Blue, the cart-horse at Castlemadder, her tears had had no connection with the financial side of his loss. And the pigs at Shottisham had all been separate characters, real and entertaining as children in a class. But these hens seemed less individualized than sheep, less sensitive than fish, and her feeling for them was entirely practical and financial, such as she imagined a grocer might have for his lumps of lard and tins of tea. When she shut the houses for the night their heads, as she saw them above the shutter, seemed to suggest no more of life and laughter than a row of umbrella-handles and walking-sticks. As far as any affectionate emotion was concerned she would not have minded finding them all dead the next morning.

This was perhaps as well, for it was a common thing to find one or two of them dead. Also the Rhode Islands, on which Greg had mainly concentrated, had a way of "falling over," as Woodsell called it, when they came to the laying stage—which meant that they had to be sold surreptitiously as table-birds, to the detriment of the stock. Then lately there had been some ominous mortalities among the young chicks. This very day she wondered what Greg was finding in the brooder-house.

He came out of it just as she finished her arks. Poor old Greg! He looked more shuffling and dejected than ever these days. Even to his hopefulness it was becoming apparent that the chicken weren't doing too well. Besides, lately he seemed to have lost some of that hopefulness itself, as if the loss of Brenda Light had extinguished other lights in his mind. It must be three weeks now since he had spent an evening

at the Old Parsonage—as Jess knew to her cost. Mrs. Light had kept her word, but the results had not been quite what her victim's wife had expected.

She signalled to him cheerfully.

"Hullo! Finished?"

He came towards her.

"What, dear?"

She thought that he was growing a little deaf.

"Have you finished in there? How did you find them?"

"Not too good. There's seventeen dead in the bottom foster-mother and twelve in the top."

"Well, it might be worse. Only two or three more than yesterday. I hear at Polthooks they lost seventy in a night."

"Oh, yes, it might be worse. I expect that soon we shall be sweeping them up."

It was not like Greg to show even that amount of irony, and Jess went anxiously towards him. He looked sunk.

"My poor old boy . . ."

"Don't," he said and moved away from her, so that she might well have cried "Don't."

Instead she said:

"Well, I'll go in and see about the dinner. It's nearly time."

A quarter of an hour later they were both seated at the table, starting another of those nearly silent meals to which she had not even yet grown used. Greg ate fast, seeming hardly to notice his food. She ate slowly, with difficulty and repulsion. As a rule he went out directly he had finished, making some excuse about his work, leaving her to struggle on alone or empty her plate into the fire.

To-day, however, she noticed that he ate more slowly, fiddling with his food. She wondered if he disliked it; she had released herself from a part of her toil by buying some large pink slices of sausage, and now she began to fear that she had been selfish and had spared herself at his expense.

"Don't you like it, dear?"

"Don't like what?"

"This sausage. I saw it at Farable's yesterday and he said it was very nice; so I thought it might save me cooking, as I had to do the arks this morning."

"Oh, it isn't bad at all, and of course with all this extra work you ought to save yourself as much as possible."

He was always kind and considerate when he thought of her at all.

"It saves firing too."

He made no answer, but dreamed over his plate.

Some time later she asked him what he was doing that afternoon—not so much out of curiosity as out of her longing to break the silence which seemed monstrously swollen by the ticking of the clock. She had to repeat her question twice before he said:

"I dunno. I've some eggs to take to Starnash and to Maidenbower, and a table-bird for Songhurst—that's all. I shan't go till after tea."

"Wouldn't it be better to go in the afternoon, while it's light?"

"No, I'd rather be here while it's light. I want to fix the roof-lining in the brooder-house, and I can't do that in the dark."

She knew then that he was intending a new assault on the Parsonage. He had not been there for several days and she had hoped that he was beginning to see the uselessness of any further attack. But either Mrs. Light had not repulsed him firmly enough or he was undefeatable.

There had been a letter. When he refused to take the hint of the closed door the lady had evidently written to make things clearer. Jess could only guess what she wrote, though she had seen the letter many times tortured in his hands. Her curiosity was quite academic, for she had felt no jealousy or distrust of Mrs. Light since their meeting. In fact since that day her life had been enlarged by a new relationship. The woman her husband loved had become something to her personally. It was difficult to describe to herself what she felt, but she certainly looked upon her rival as an ally.

Ever since that day when she had challenged her in a sort of cold despair, fulfilling an urge, an instinct, rather than expecting achievement, her life had changed in a number of small, almost frivolous ways. For one thing she never came in from the poultry without brushing her

hair, still holding in her mind the picture of a black, shining head. She had bought some face-powder, too, which gave to her skin a faint, childish sweetness of peardrops. She did not seriously enter into competition with the other woman, but she had seen wisdom in her looks as well as in her words and ways, and she was humble enough to take all her lessons to heart.

Again and again while regulating her dealings with Greg she found herself asking: "What would Mrs. Light do?" An experienced, sophisticated woman would know how to handle a man, how to manœuvre him out of disaster. She would not weep, or fall into futile rages, or equally futile pleadings; she would act calmly and wisely, with her head as well as with her heart. Desperately as each situation arose Jess sought to deal with it as the other woman would. She even had secret dialogues with her, of which she was ashamed—for it was childish to hold imaginary conversation with someone you had spoken to only once—but which seemed nevertheless to clarify things in a mysterious way.

To-day she said in her heart to the woman Greg loved:

What would you do if you were me? Would you ask him straight out if he means to go to see you this evening?

The deep, cool voice that her memory held replied:

You have a perfect right to ask him, and as you've already talked over the matter with him it seems rather unnatural not to.

But we've never said a word about it to each other since that day I came to see you. I know that he doesn't want to discuss you with me. He'd rather bear his unhappiness alone.

Are you sure? Are you sure he isn't saying nothing just because he's ashamed and afraid?

But I've given him plenty of opportunities.

Are you sure he's seen them? He's like a child, you know, hiding in the bushes. He can't see clearly what you're doing and he's making mistakes about you.

Jess might have questioned if, though the voice was Mrs. Light's, the sentiments were not her own. But it was a way of thinking things out which brought an extraordinary clearness with it—a clearness that had

a sort of objective compulsion, so that she no longer wandered round and round as she did with her unexternalized thoughts, but felt in herself also the power to act.

"Greg, dear," she said gently, "I wish you'd be open with me. I don't want to pry into your secrets, but I want to know, and I—I think I have a right to know if you're going to see Mrs. Light this evening."

"I don't want to talk about Mrs. Light."

"But, dear, we must. We can't go on like this. I know you're unhappy about her and I want to know why."

He laughed in a cackling sort of way that was both new and unpleasant.

"Really, Jess! You know that I've fallen in love with a woman who's quite out of my reach for every reason there is, and then you ask me to tell you why I'm unhappy, as if there was any mystery about it."

"But there is——" She broke off. She must be careful what she said, for she had a secret too. If he knew of her relations with Brenda he would be as much upset and shaken as she had been when she had heard of his. She continued, her mind pausing on every word:

"You weren't unhappy all that time you were going to see her before I knew anything about it. So as I can't believe that my knowing has made all the difference, I feel that something—some new thing—must have—has—cropped up."

She watched his face anxiously as she spoke; but there was no doubt, no question in his troubled blue eyes. On the contrary they turned to her with an appeal she had feared she might never see in them again.

"You're right," he said. "She's refused to see me. She doesn't want me to come any more."

"Oh, Greg."

Her own eyes immediately blinded, and the next moment he was in her arms, his face hidden in her breast.

"Jess—Oh, Jess, I can't bear it," he mumbled against her body. "What's made her turn against me like this? What have I done? I've

done nothing. But she won't let me come. Oh, Jess, I can't live without seeing her sometimes."

If she had given him poison she could not have felt more guilty. She did not move. With her secret in her heart she could not stroke his hair and comfort him as she would have done had her heart been clear. She sat motionless, supporting him lifelessly in her arms, while her inmost soul seemed to turn upon itself and reproach her for her treachery and cruelty. At that moment if she could have given him Brenda she would.

"My dear," she faltered at last, "don't you think it's possible that she's discovered what your feelings for her really are? If she can't return them it's only natural that she should want to make a complete break. And wouldn't you be happier—happier in the long run—if you took the chance she's given you and didn't see her again? You see, it isn't if—as if anything could ever be *done*."

"I know. I know. But I don't care about that. That isn't what I'm asking. I'm not even asking her to love me. All I want is to see her—see her again in the way I used to—sit with her and talk to her—I don't care about anything else. I know it's all hopeless; but at least I used to have something that made life worth living. It isn't now."

The tears rolled down her cheeks. She must take this as her punishment for having deceived him.

"If only I knew," he murmured on, his muffled voice shaking childishly in her breast, "if only I knew what I'd done to offend her. But I've been thinking over every single thing I did or said last time we were together, and there's nothing—absolutely nothing—to explain why she's treated me like this. I can't believe that it's because she's found out that I'm in love with her. She *must* have known that before . . . and besides, she isn't the sort of woman who'd be so cruel. . . ."

Jess did not speak. She was ashamed to question or persuade him any more. She must still be glad that he suspected nothing, that he had seen no ominous connection between dates, that as far as she was concerned he was simple and trustful as a child. She knew too that she had done only what her heart dictated as best for them both.

Nevertheless she felt guilty in all her being, a thief who robs the poor. It scarcely mattered to her then that his happiness had not been come by honestly, that she had taken away only what he himself had stolen from her. Impossible as she would have found it—as she found it now—to be happy while deceiving him, she must acknowledge that his own dishonesty seemed to have made very little difference to his contentment. He had drugged himself with those few hours at Brenda's feet, so that he had scarcely felt the hopelessness of his position or his treachery to the wife of twenty years. And it was this drug which she had taken away, so that he was now awake to pain. She knew that both shame and despair had been at the bottom of his silence during the last three weeks. She could not argue away the shame or hold out any hope to the despair; but she had it in her power to give him back his drug.

It seemed to her now almost a harmless one. Since she had seen and spoken to Brenda Light she had ceased to fear her as an unscrupulous and predatory rival. She felt that it would do Greg very little harm to see her occasionally. The trouble was that he would not be satisfied with merely occasional visits. And there would probably be kisses . . . her mind recoiled from the thought of those kisses . . . they offended her conscience as well as her heart. She felt that there could be no blessing on such a surrender and that it was bound to lead to further difficulties. Drugs require to be taken in larger and larger doses.

Yet here was Greg's head helpless as a child's upon her breast, while he strove with a sorrow she herself had inflicted. She thought: Oh, what can I do? Then she thought: Perhaps Mrs. Light would help me.

It was wonderful, the refreshment that came to her spirit once she had decided to consult the other woman. It was almost as if she had been waiting all these weeks for the opportunity and now at last had found it. She felt convinced that Brenda Light's wider experience and acuter mind—to say nothing of her more detached point of view—would be able to supply what she herself lacked in judgment. She might also be willing to collaborate in any plan they could devise

together. But this was not all; Jess knew that her expectations from the interview were not limited to its practical results. She saw herself sitting once more in a spacious, lovely room, talking to a woman who was witty and sad and kind, whose views of life were ripe with experienced wisdom. Her heart thrilled with an excitement that had been sterile since her schooldays . . . not since Miss Mackintosh had invited her to tea in her study had she felt anything like this.

Could it be possible, she wondered, that she was starting a "crush" on Mrs. Light? It seemed ridiculous and unnatural, considering the circumstances and her time of life; but on second thoughts, was it really so surprising? After all, she had lived for years apart from the educated, well-bred people she used to know; her poverty and her work had condemned her to associate with those whom in the far-off years before her marriage she would have considered ignorant and rough. Save for an occasional Rector's wife, like Mrs. Malpas, she had scarcely even spoken to a woman of what used to be her own class. She had renewed the contact in circumstances that had given it an especially exciting quality—a sort of sinister glamour. She did not even now entirely approve of Mrs. Light; but she was impressed by her and she was surprised by her. She had been flattered by her confidences and she had been swept into gratitude by her generosity. The rest had been done in the weeks between then and now, when in all her sorrow and perplexity she had turned for counsel to the superior image in her heart.

She must go to see her, and it had better be done at once, before Greg made his assault this evening. She could go this afternoon, while he was working in the brooder-house; she would tell him that she was just running up to the village for a few things—it would not be a lie if she bought some biscuits at Farable's Stores. She would not be able to wear her best clothes, but somehow she had lost confidence in these after seeing Mrs. Light in a knitted jumper and old tweed skirt.

She made herself as neat as possible, with a pair of clean shoes, a mackintosh and a beret, and set off, treacherously carrying her shopping-bag. Once on the doorstep of the Old Parsonage she was seized with qualms. Suppose Mrs. Light refused to see her, or, even if

she saw her, refused to discuss the matter with her. After all, she had spoken to her only once; all the later conversations between them had been in her imagination alone. Her friend and adviser was no more than the good fairy of a child's tale—without existence in the world of facts. For the first time she saw her errand as preposterous and would have turned from the door if she had not already rung the bell.

IV

BRENDA LIGHT

BRENDA waited to see if Mrs. Shafto would go to the door. She had done so once or twice in Nan Scallow's absence as if to emphasise its temporary and pardonable nature. She always expected Lucinda to answer the bell when she was at home, but Lucinda had gone out this afternoon—Brenda was pleased to think that it was to a cinema, though as she went inevitably with the Malpases the expedition amounted to little more than a meeting of the Antiquarian Society under another name.

She waited, listening. There was not a sound in the quiet house. Mrs. Shafto must have decided that neither duty nor generosity had precedence of her after-dinner cup of tea. Brenda rose only half unwillingly. A caller offered at least some diversion, and it would not be Greg Marlott at this hour. She was surprised when she opened the door to his wife.

"Oh, Mrs. Light, I'm so sorry—I hope I haven't called at an inconvenient moment."

"No, of course not. Come in."

She felt quite pleased to see her. She liked the situation—two women talking over confidentially the man who was giving so much trouble to them both. Perhaps Jess Marlott would be able to help her deal more expeditiously with Greg. She had faithfully carried out her promises, she had been scrupulous in her denials; but she was bored with his many returns. He was evidently the sort of man who could not take a hint, and the force of the letter she had written him had been weakened by her conviction that he would certainly be fool enough to show it to his wife. Perhaps that was why she was here now.

"I've been wanting to see you," she said, as they sat down. "There's

a lot I should like to ask you about your husband. He still keeps calling here, you know, though I won't see him."

"I—I'm sorry. I'm afraid he's being a nuisance. But he's so dreadfully unhappy."

The tears stood in her eyes, lighting them up so that they looked large and liquid, like a child's. Her appearance had changed, Brenda thought. She looked slimmer, neater—no doubt because she was not wearing the awful Sunday clothes. She also looked unhappier—or rather perhaps more worn down with unhappiness, for she had been tragic enough on her first visit. But then her pain had been sharp and new, while now it was a dull, accustomed burden, bowing her shoulders and withering her blood. It seemed dreadful and ridiculous that she should suffer so on account of that boring, blundering creature's pursuit of a woman he could never have and who did not want him.

"You mustn't worry about me," said Brenda. "The only difficulty is that my maid's away ill, so sometimes I have to open the door myself. I hope he won't call at a moment I'm not expecting him. It would have been awkward if I'd found him on the doorstep instead of you."

Mrs. Marlott said:

"What I came to ask is this: Don't you think it wouldn't be better if—if you did see him occasionally? I mean he's so dreadfully unhappy at never seeing you at all. He says the times he used to spend with you in the evenings were the greatest happiness he's ever had in his life—that he used to look forward to them all day—that he can't live without them."

"Good God!" said Brenda.

"He doesn't expect—in fact I think now he doesn't even want any more."

Brenda looked at her in astonishment.

"My dear Mrs. Marlott, am I right in thinking that you've come to me for the very opposite reason that you came last time? Then you wanted me to promise never to see your husband again. Now do you want me to promise that I *will* see him?"

"It isn't exactly that I want you to promise anything. I came really

to ask your advice—what I ought to do. I can't bear to see him suffering the way he is, when such a little thing would satisfy him. It seems little to me now, though I made such a fuss about it three weeks ago, and I hope you won't mind my calling it a little thing."

Brenda closed her eyes. She felt again as she had felt on Jess Marlott's first visit—a confused feeling, mixed of bewilderment and irritation, of being in contact with a mind and outlook quite apart from life as she knew it. The Marlotts belonged emotionally to a world as far removed from hers as Sirius, a world in which, emotionally speaking, there was no jazz, light verse, or delicate, frivolous art, but where every piece of music was a symphony, every poem an epic, every picture a masterpiece in oils; a world in which no such thing existed as a pleasant flirtation—only love, divorce, happiness and utter sacrifice. For her to enter such a world was to enter some fantastic place where the law of gravity has been monstrously exaggerated, so that everything you pick up weighs ten times what you expected and you stagger loaded with a silver spoon.

"Look here," she said, "let's get this as clear as possible. You don't mind your husband coming to see me as he did before. You'd rather he did that than make himself unhappy. Now I ask you: is it because you trust him or because you trust me?"

"I trust you both. That is, to be candid, I trust him because I trust you. I didn't mean him to come as often as he used to—almost every day; that would be impossible. But if you let him come and see you once a week . . ."

"It would be worse than nothing, I should imagine."

Mrs. Marlott said earnestly:

"No, I don't think that. I think it would be much better. Greg is used to having things cut down, having to manage on very little. It's only the total deprivation that's hurting him so."

"Like cutting out drink?"

"Yes, exactly. You can get delirium tremens if you suddenly cut that out altogether."

Brenda sighed. Her effort to lighten the conversation had failed significantly. She looked into her own heart, uncertain of what the

mirror held. Did she really want to start again with Greg Marlott? His visits had been better than nobody's, but in the days when she had welcomed at least their beginnings, there had never been in her mind the smallest suspicion of those weighty emotions which she knew now would fill every corner of it with unrest. It would be no longer a question of sitting and listening to him, of receiving his adoration and his kisses: she would be haunted all through with the thought of Jess and her stark, honest suffering, by the thought of his own uncompromising, unfulfilled desire. She still had it in her power to enjoy an occasional flirtation, but she shrank from a serious love affair—even if serious only on one side. Neither could she believe as his wife evidently believed, that such an arrangement could last, or indeed exist at all without at least some hope on his part. She saw a future complicated with all sorts of unattractive possibilities.

"Is it really wise," she asked, "to trust either of us? I mean I can't guarantee to make him happy and keep him unsatisfied at one and the same time. No woman could. There's no standing still in love, and if he really loves me I can't believe he'll be content even with an infinite series of visits of the sort he's paid me hitherto."

She wondered but did not ask: How far does your self-sacrifice go? Exactly how many tons does it weigh? If I loved him and he could afford to marry me, would you give him this divorce you talk about so earnestly, or are you only asking me to see him because you know it can't lead to anything more?

Jess said:

"I've told you that he's never expected anything more than he's had. And I'm sure—especially if you show him that from your side—your point of view—it's all he can get . . . then I believe he'd be satisfied."

Brenda said nothing. She felt reluctant and impatient. Really Jess Marlott was a little too simple. Yet at the same time she shrank from sending her away with a mere refusal to oblige her on this rather strange point. It was queer, but she could not help liking the woman, in spite of what seemed to her the imbecility of her reactions to life and love. She was honest and kind and there was no littleness about her: she ought to be helped in some way to suffer less. . . .

The telephone bell rang in the hall—a welcome interruption. Brenda stood up.

“Do you mind waiting while I answer it? I shan’t be a moment.”

It was probably Lucinda, ringing up from Potcommon. Brenda had agreed rather unwillingly to go over there and drive some of the cinema party home. She hoped that Lucinda had contrived a respite for her—she had promised to do her best.

The hope seemed realized when the operator’s voice asked:

“Is that Woodhorn seventy-three?”

“Yes.”

“Hold on a minute please.”

Lucinda in a public call-box.

But it was a man’s voice that said:

“May I speak to Mrs. Light?”

Brenda suddenly felt cold. Or rather the sensation was as if a recent and highly sensitive bruise had been sharply touched. But her voice was wooden as she answered:

“Speaking.”

There was a pause during which she seemed to know everything. She certainly was not surprised when what seemed ages later the voice said:

“Brenda, this is Michael.”

“Oh . . . where are you?”

The words sounded limp and vague, but her voice was still steady.

“I’m at a strange place called Potcommon.”

This time it was not a touch on a bruise but a blow full on the chest. She felt winded, and for a moment could not speak. When she recovered she said lightly:

“On holiday?”

“Lord, no!”

“Why are you there, then? I thought you were in Italy.”

“So I was till a week ago, when I came back and heard you’d gone down to Sussex.”

“How did you find out my telephone number?”

“I looked in the Directory.”

It was the first chink she had shown in her armour, and a little arrow of laughter came to meet it out of the silence.

"Oh, you weren't difficult to trace," he continued. "Did you think you had hidden yourself?"

"Of course not. I never meant to hide."

She knew that in a sense she was lying.

"Well, when can I come and see you?"

"I don't want to see you, Michael."

She was lying in all senses now and he knew it as well as she.

"Don't be obstructive, my dear. You must let me come. We've done a year's penance, and I think it's time we forgave each other."

She had been complaining of Mrs. Marlott's heavy touch on life—here in revenge was somebody whose touch was far too light.

"Don't come, Michael. I haven't changed. If you came it would only make things difficult for us both."

"I don't think it would. Brenda, there's so much I could explain if you'd let me."

"I shan't let you."

She moistened her lips. The hand that held the receiver was shaking. Her mind felt small and lost, like a child wandering through dark rooms. In one of those rooms lay a grey-haired man asleep—no, not asleep—dead. Nicky was dead, and Michael did not seem to care.

The far-off voice said:

"There's only a ghost between us."

Still trembling, she hung up the receiver.

An eternity seemed to have passed since she had left the drawing-room; and it was almost a shock to find Jess Marlott still sitting there. She was slumped in her chair, obviously a very tired woman. At any other moment Brenda would have felt compassionate, but now the only reaction she could bring to her was an earnest desire that she would go. She felt for the moment absolutely unable to return to the problem of Greg Marlott and his tiresome fidelities. Why on earth couldn't the woman look after her own husband?

She heard herself mumbling an apology as she sat down and grabbed a cigarette.

"Oh, it's quite all right. But I mustn't stay much longer now. I ought to be getting home, or Greg may miss me."

Thank heaven!

"I don't think I've told you—but I've found out that he means to come and see you after tea."

"What! To-day?"

"Yes. He was talking about it at dinner-time. That's why I thought I'd come and ask you if . . ." her voice murmured on, but Brenda was not listening. Whatever happened Greg must not come—not to-day. For Michael would be here. She knew now that Michael would be here, and though the sight of Michael might be the most salutary thing in the world for Greg she felt that she simply could not endure to meet him again in the presence of such a visitor. That first encounter would require all that she had of power and poise, and how can one expect to display power and poise with an amorous donkey blundering against one?

Greg must not be there. Yet how could she keep him out, condemned as she probably was to open the door herself? Oh, damn Mrs. Shafto! Damn Nan Scallow! It really was degrading to have the Servant Problem rearing its suburban head among the ultimates of passion and regret. In days that seemed long ago she would have welcomed the intrigue of keeping two pursuing males apart. But now not only had her embittered taste revolted, but the stage was no longer set for a French farce; or rather, since there still were plenty of doors, an important member of the cast was missing—the trim, black and white, silk-stockinged maid, with lewd, laughing eyes and discreet finger on lip. The play simply could not proceed without her.

" . . . so I thought perhaps if you saw him only for a few minutes and told him that because of scandal and gossip he mustn't come so often or stay so long, I believe he'd accept it and be happy again—and not bother you so much."

("An adventuress with servant trouble") . . . Brenda made an effort.

"I'm sorry," she said firmly. "I've been thinking things over and

I can't do that. It wouldn't do any good—I'm sure; and believe me, I know. He might be happy for a bit, but it wouldn't last and then he'd feel worse about it than ever. But I tell you what I'll do. I'll write to him and put the thing in such a way that he'll give up the idea and settle down to forget me."

"He's—I know that he's had a letter from you already; and it hasn't helped him—in fact, it's the other way round."

"I daresay it is. I wrote that letter when I was angry and all I said was that I'd rather he didn't call. He probably thinks he's offended me and wants to explain."

"That's it—exactly. He says he can't imagine what he's done wrong."

"Well, this time I'll put it differently. I'll ask him to keep away for my sake—make something rather fine and noble of it on his part. I'll tell him I'm doing it in both our interests, and that since we can't have what we want it's better to end it all on a noble memory. You know the sort of letter."

Jess Marlott obviously didn't.

"Do you really think it'll do any good?"

Brenda could not answer: Yes, I believe he's silly enough for that; so she said:

"It's a way out for him that doesn't hurt his pride."

"I don't believe he's got any pride."

"Perhaps not the usual sort, but every man who's in love is proud of his love—he can't help it. If he thinks he's keeping away from me for my own sake he'll have the gratification of believing that I really love him and that he isn't just being sent away because he isn't wanted. All the time he stops away he'll be feeling he's doing something for me. It's psychological, you know—emotion transformed into action."

She suddenly felt delighted with her own idea. She saw Greg Marlott as just the sort of idealistic ass to find happiness for the rest of his life in chivalrous silence. He was emotionally, if not physically, the typical "second hero" of romantic fiction—the lover who stands aside to let the best man win. She saw her release and his gratification take place together.

But Mrs. Marlott did not appear convinced.

"Do you really mean you're going to let him think you love him?"

"That I'm in danger of loving him—it's the best way out. Do you mind?"

"Not for myself—no. But for him. It's deceiving him in rather a dreadful way."

Brenda suddenly lost patience. She had been in an acutely nervous, irritable state since her return from the hall, and now she felt unequal to this new load of Marlott solemnity.

"How do you know?" she asked in a flurry of malice. "I may not be deceiving him—it may be true."

"That you're in danger of falling in love with him?"

"Yes—if he goes on coming."

She watched the effect of her words.

"But I thought——" Jess Marlott began, and Brenda knew that she was thinking about Michael. She remembered telling her quite a lot about him on her first visit. She felt half-ashamed now of the way in which she had outpoured herself. It was impossible—she felt the obstacle throughout her being—that she should tell her of this new development, which had taken place almost in her presence. She could imagine and dread her reaction of romantic earnestness. . . . No, let Jess Marlott think that she was in danger of falling in love with her husband—already in love with him, even—if that would help her keep him away.

"My dear friend," she said, "I really do know what I'm talking about. It's a year since I saw or heard anything of the man I used to love; and I'm not at all the sort of woman to go about empty-hearted. Your husband has been very kind and attentive to me in a place where I've been worse than lonely. Surely you're under-rating his attractions if you think I could go on seeing him day after day for weeks—talking to him, listening to him, having him make love to me—without at least some feeling . . ."

"But you said——"

"I know. I know. Of course I said it. And it was true, as far as it

went. But no woman's such a fish. . . ." Her agitation was gaining on her. It was preposterous that she should have to think out lies to persuade Mrs. Marlott, when her whole mind was bent on a different emergency. "Oh, do please let me tackle this situation my own way. After all, it concerns me as much as you. Of course you know your husband better than I do"—or do you?—"but believe me I'm not without experience of men and their ways. I feel we can arrange things so that he keeps his pride, while you and I both have some peace. Anyway, please let me try."

And please, please go. I can't bear sitting here any longer arguing with you on this ridiculous matter. I want to think. I must think. Please go and let me think.

But when at last the poor Marlott was gone she could not think. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, but in the darkness only lightning played on broken images. Her mind was like a deserted stage, where there is nothing but stacks of disused scenery and a lumber of properties.

She saw a cloudy back-drop of Switzerland—the peak of the Kubli with the clouds behind it, looking like ice cream and cotton wool. The veranda of the hotel where a tall, fair, middle-aged man sat reading the *Berner Zeitung* . . . she had thought he was a foreigner till her mother introduced him.

A high meadow enamelled with Alpine flowers. That was where she had first known that he wanted her and not her mother. She tried to recapture him as he had been then, rubbing her eyes till the image came. But she could see only herself, so young and needy, craving so desperately for kindness and escape. Good-bye, Mother! be good! . . . thank God! thank God! . . . Her husband's face looking down on hers, surprised and thankful. He had made love much more attractively than the young men who had occasionally taken advantage of dark corners and her inexperience.

A sob stuck in her throat, dry as a crust. Oh, why had she failed to keep the happiness that those days had brought her? For she had been happy. The scenes she saw now were all steeped in sunshine: the

tumbled, craggy, cypress-pricked landscapes of northern Italy—strips torn out of the background of a Cinquecento picture—the oily blue of the Bay of Naples—a hill-side in Capri, shadowed as if to glorify the light of sky and sea and a great white arch of rock sweeping up towards a rainbow . . . even the sun on Kensington Gardens—the air close, the colours muffled with heat—a bed of pansies and her little dog on a string . . . Nicky's face smiling down at her . . . the Dutch Garden. She had been completely happy then.

Had she ever been so completely happy since?—even in those moments which should have held the full experience of delight? Had Michael given her even once what she had accepted from Nicky as a matter of course? Looking back, she doubted. And yet, if she was honest she must acknowledge that all her happiness with Nicky had been vitiated in a greater or less degree by boredom. Again and again she had fallen from contentment into that debility of spirit which afflicted her now at Woodhorn. Why was it that all the best things in her life had bored her? . . . Nicky and Woodhorn Parsonage. . . . Whereas Michael had never bored her—he had stimulated, enraged, delighted, exasperated, but never bored. And now he was coming back—to save her again from boredom as he had saved her once before. This time what price would she have to pay for the cure of her debility?

She shivered . . . her weakness frightened her; and yet even in fear there was a stimulation that had been lacking half an hour ago. Michael would soon be here . . . she felt convinced that he meant to come to Woodhorn; perhaps he had already started . . .

What should she do? She was no nearer now than she had been twenty minutes earlier to unravelling the complications of the next few hours. The only progress that had been made—and made by time rather than by thought—was that she now knew for certain that Lucinda depended on her to fetch her home. She would have rung her up before this if she had been able to devise another plan.

Should she scrap the engagement and leave her daughter to come home as best she could? There was always the 'bus.

If she went to Potcommon she would probably miss Michael Barney. Did she want to miss him? The fact that she was uncertain

suggested a further reason for doing so. She had better be out when he came—to avoid him was as necessary as to avoid Greg Marlott. Oh hell! She had forgotten all about Greg Marlott. But now she saw him blundering on the doorstep—she saw both men on the doorstep . . . well, perhaps to encounter Barney would mean the cure of Marlott; but she did not want him cured that way, any more than Mrs. Marlott had wanted him cured by meeting *her* there. Oh, damn everything for being so complicated—and all for the want of a good parlourmaid. Perhaps after all she had better go to Potcommon; she would at least be out of the house, and since she seemed to have no power to settle and dispose of events it might be as well to let as much as possible happen in her absence. Then she could take up the story an instalment further on and make better sense of it.

It was true that she ran the risk of meeting Michael in Potcommon. A town of three thousand people, one cinema and one decent hotel must reduce their orbits and increase their chances of contact. But she had by now convinced herself that he meant to come to Woodhorn; and even if she met him on the way it would be at least without the complication of Greg Marlott.

She was preparing to leave the room when once more the telephone bell rang in the hall. Her heart beat high and suffocatingly. This must be Michael again, resuming their broken talk. She half determined not to go to the instrument. When she did it was only to hear the bathos of Lucinda's voice.

"That you, Mummy?"

"Yes."

"Look here, you needn't come over if you don't want to."

"Oh . . ."

She suddenly felt angry with Lucinda for leaving her putting off till so late.

"I'd very nearly started."

"I'm sorry, but I didn't know till three minutes ago that I could get a lift home. There's someone here we used to know—Mr. Barney."

"Oh."

BRENDA LIGHT

"He's staying in Potcommon, and he says he'd like to see you before he goes back. So he suggested driving me home."

"When? At once?"

"In about twenty minutes."

"Is he with you? Can he hear what you're saying?"

"No. He's gone to fetch his car."

She could escape him if she wished—as she felt Lucinda wished. Lucinda would be her accomplice in any plan she chose to make. But all she said was:—

"Very well. I'll expect you both for tea."

LUCINDA LIGHT

THE film was *The Ghost Goes West*. Lucinda had been half delighted, half disturbed by its arrival at the Potcommon Electric Theatre. She was entirely ignorant of its nature and a little uneasy on the subject of ghosts. She had gone in some hope of instruction; nevertheless it had been a relief to find the subject treated lightly. After all, that was the most reassuring way to treat ghosts. One did not want either to be terrified or to be mystified by them. Here was a ghost bringing neither fright nor confusion, and for the moment she was grateful. It was not till the film was over that she realized that all her difficulties were still unsolved.

"Is that the end? Do we go home now?" asked Mrs. Malpas.

But her family ordered her sternly to remain seated.

"There's a Silly Symphony and the News before the Ghost comes on again. Besides, Mrs. Light isn't coming for us till half-past four."

So they sat on through the interval, while the organ played and the lights changed from gold to green and from green to blue, and thence to purple and red and orange and back to gold in a way that Mrs. Malpas agreed it would have been a pity to miss.

Lucinda sat between the Rector and his daughter Petronilla, who was not very good company, being engaged throughout the interval in shouting against the organ at her sister Leonora, with whom she was arguing her chances of becoming a film star. These chances appeared to Lucinda exceedingly slender, as she was a phenomenally plain child, with legs like tree-trunks and a square, mud-coloured face. But she herself believed in them strongly, and Leonora, though remarkably outspoken, was unable to convince her that by the time

she was seventeen she would not necessarily look more like Deanna Durbin than she did now.

Lucinda had heard the argument so many times that she turned automatically from it to her other neighbour. He offered her a peppermint cream.

"Thank you very much," she said, adding politely: "I enjoyed that film. Didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. I'm glad we had a chance of seeing it. I'm interested in ghosts."

"Oh. . . . Have you ever seen one?"

"Dear me, no; and I hope I never do."

"But you believe that people can see them?"

"Well, yes. There's too much evidence for that sort of thing for any open-minded person to doubt that it can happen sometimes."

"I—I suppose you've heard of the ghost in Ember Lane?"

"Yes, I've heard there's supposed to be one. We once had a gardener—Bob Wickstreet—who said his father had seen it. But that's just the sort of ghost I don't believe in."

"Oh . . ."

"In the best authenticated ghost-stories," continued the Rector, "the apparition is nearly always of someone at the point of death or very lately dead. These tales of spooks haunting a special place for an indefinite period, like the one in Ember Lane, are just popular folk-lore based on moonlight and imagination."

Lucinda again said "Oh . . ."

"Remind me to lend you Myers' book on *Phantasms of the Living*—that is if you've not already read it—and there's a volume on *Ghosts and Apparitions* in the *Psychical Experiences Series*. I think you'd enjoy them."

"Thank you very much. I—I suppose you don't think that people—souls—can get imprisoned in places—like Chequers Cottage or Ember Lane, for instance?"

"Imprisoned? Souls? You'll have to explain to me how the immaterial can be imprisoned in the material."

"I don't quite mean the material place itself, but their memories of

it. They might—I don't know how to put it exactly—but mightn't they die with such a strong memory of a place that they couldn't ever escape from it? . . . I mean, in a way it might be haunting *them*."

"That doesn't explain how other people can see them in the place they remember."

No, it didn't. And she hadn't made her meaning clear even to herself. She was trying to sift it through some deeper thought when she heard a movement behind her and a man's voice said:

"I'm not mistaken—you *are* Lucinda Light?"

Before she turned round she knew who had spoken; and her heart seemed to go tough and leathery—a hard little ball in her breast.

"Yes, I am."

She would much rather have said: "No, I'm not."

"I was sure you were, though you've grown up since I saw you last. I've been watching you for some time from the circle and hoping I wasn't mistaken. You know who I am, don't you?"

"Yes—you're Mr. Barney."

She tried to look pleased. After all, she knew nothing definite. She had deliberately shut her ears to tattling voices, shut her eyes to censorious looks. She had not been able to suppress all her doubts and questions, but it was only her guess (though a guess made poignant by many qualms of certainty) that Mr. Barney had been the subject of that long talk her mother had had with her father just before he died. Mummy had never told her what they had been talking about, though once she had cried: "If only I'd known he was ill I'd have managed things differently—I'd have been more careful what I said." And never since that day had Lucinda seen Mr. Barney, though her mother, she believed, had seen him at least once. She had thrust him out of her mind, with all the doubts that, if she let herself think of him, would rise between her and Mummy. And here he was in flesh and blood, a big, square-shouldered, pleasant man, sitting in the empty row behind her and leaning over the back of her chair—talking to her, though she scarcely heard a word he said.

"I beg your pardon."

"I was only saying that I hope I may meet your mother while I'm

down here. Perhaps you will let me drive you home when the performance is over."

"Oh, thanks—thanks very much. But——" She was going to say "Mummy is coming for me," then realizing a new set of difficulties here, substituted: "I'm with Mr. and Mrs. Malpas."

By this time all the eyes and ears of the Malpas family were upon her, making an introduction inevitable. Moreover, they had heard of the offered drive back to Woodhorn.

"If Mr. Barney is actually *going* there," said Mrs. Malpas, "it would save your mother coming over here."

"Is Mrs. Light coming to fetch you home?"

"Yes—that is——" She hesitated. Which would be worst for Mummy: to arrive and find him here in the cinema or to have him turn up unexpectedly at Woodhorn? She had an idea that both would be bad. Then suddenly her hesitation passed, as she thought of a plan. "I expect she'd be glad not to have to come. I could 'phone and stop her—I mean, if it's really all right. There'll be one or two others to take back to Woodhorn besides me. That's why she was coming—Mr. Malpas has only a motor-bike and sidecar."

"I can take as many of your friends as like to come."

"Thank you so much. Then I'll go and 'phone at once."

"And I'll go and bring round my car from the hotel. That is—how much longer are you staying?"

"Oh, only till the big film comes on again, which is quite soon after the interval."

"Right. Then I'll meet you outside in a quarter of an hour."

She noticed that he did not offer to telephone for her, and she was glad, for he would have taken Mummy unawares and perhaps lost her a chance of avoiding him. Lucinda would give her that chance.

"That you, Mummy?"

The familiar voice said:

"Yes."

"Look here, you needn't come over if you don't want to."

"Oh. . . ." The voice did not sound as relieved as Lucinda had

expected, in fact the next moment it spoke quite sharply. "I'd very nearly started."

"I'm sorry, but I didn't know till three minutes ago that I could get a lift home. There's someone here we used to know—Mr. Barney."

"Oh . . ."

Again the tone was unexpected. It lacked surprise.

"He's staying in Potcommon and he says he'd like to see you before he goes back. So he suggested driving me home."

"When? At once?"

"In about twenty minutes."

"Is he with you? Can he hear what you're saying??"

"No. He's gone to fetch his car."

There was a short pause. Mummy was making plans to be out.

"Very well. I'll expect you both for tea."

Lucinda felt a shock. Why hadn't Mummy taken the chance offered her? She had somehow felt convinced that her mother did not want to meet Mr. Barney and the thought that she did gave her a queer, disappointed feeling. But there was nothing that she could do about it—nothing that she could say. She remained tongue-tied at the telephone till her mother's voice came again.

"Did you hear that? I'll expect you both for tea."

"Yes—right—I'll tell him. Good-bye."

She put up the receiver and hurried away.

It was nearly five o'clock when Mr. Barney's Vauxhall pulled up at the door of the Old Parsonage, having deposited three Malpases at their gate. The hall was lit up and the golden lozenges of the Victorian glass panels were cast on the drive to light up the dancing feet of the rain. But Lucinda noticed that her mother had—most unusually—drawn the curtains in the drawing-room, so that only chinks of light showed between them.

She opened the door for Mr. Barney and ushered him in, showing him where to put his hat and coat. Her mother did not appear, but when Lucinda opened the drawing-room door she was standing just inside it.

"Hullo," she said stiffly. "Hullo, Michael."

"Hullo," he said. "Hullo, my dear;" and picked up the hand that hung slack at her side.

"Thank you for bringing Lucinda home."

"It was lucky that I saw her. I had a seat in the circle, and till the lights went up I wasn't sure if it was her or not."

"Do you often go to small-town cinemas?"

"Always," he said smiling, "when I'm in a small town."

Mummy did not smile. She sat down at the little table where tea was laid, and began to pour out.

"Are you staying long in Potcommon?"

"Till Monday."

"I didn't know there was anywhere decent to stay."

"I'm at the Grenadier Inn."

"Are you comfortable there?"

"So-so."

Then Mummy began talking about the film and Lucinda knew that this sort of conversation would go on as long as she was in the room. She also knew—or felt, rather, for it was almost a physical sensation of unrest—that her mother wanted her to go away. She herself half wanted to go, half wanted to stay. She did not care for being with Mr. Barney or for listening to her mother's uneasy talk, but she had a vague yet powerful objection to giving them the freedom of their tongues. She did not like to think of what they might say when she was gone.

Yet why should she mind? There could be nothing wrong, no disloyalties now, no slight to anyone dear. . . . Mummy had just as much right to sit and talk to Mr. Barney as she had to sit and talk to Mr. Marlott—more, even, for Mr. Marlott was a married man. She must not think of the past or of the feelings she had had once, or she would find herself turning against her mother whom she had promised always to help and love.

("If anything happens to me, I want you to promise to look after your mother. Try as far as you can to take my place—love her always. . . .")

He had said that when Mummy was away in Copenhagen, the day that the specialist had told him he was ill—very ill—with aortic disease of the heart. If he was careful he might live for years, but any sudden shock or prolonged strain might be too much for him.

"I'm telling you this, my dear, because you and I have always told each other things; and because you're old enough now to know how much I rely on you. . . .")

"... More tea, Lucinda?"

"No thank you, Mummy."

"Then do you very much mind carrying the tray through to Mrs. Shafto? One of the joys of country life," she added to Mr. Barney. "It's practically impossible to get servants. I have a girl of sorts, but she's chosen just this week to have 'flu. You don't mind, do you, Lucinda?"

"No, rather not. I'll take it through and then I can give her a hand with the washing-up."

"That will be very sweet of you."

Then just as she was lifting the tray Mummy said:

"And if Mr. Marlott calls—that's the egg man," to Mr. Barney, "will you tell him that I can't see him this evening, but I'll write."

"That you can't see him this evening, but you'll write."

"Yes—tell him I'll write."

Lucinda was surprised. It was now three weeks since they had started buying their eggs at Loats instead of from Mr. Marlott. She had taken for granted that there had been some sort of a quarrel between him and her mother. He must have annoyed her in some way . . . though all she had said was that he was becoming a nuisance. He had called several times since the change-over, but she had always refused to see him. So what on earth was she writing to him about?

Lucinda knew that she could never ask—not because her mother would refuse to tell her, but because if she did it might be another of those things which made loving her so difficult. She had always liked Mr. Marlott and felt sorry for him. She thought that he must have a very hard life, and he and his wife lived in such a miserable little bungalow. . . . She could not bear to think that her mother had added

to his adversities. And yet if he had really been a nuisance—in the way Mummy usually meant when she said nuisance . . .

To-night he came while Lucinda was still washing-up. Directly the bell rang she wiped her hands and went to answer it, without waiting to see if Mrs. Shafto would do so or not.

She opened the door, and there he stood in the rain, with the hall light shining on the wet shoulders of his mackintosh and on the curtain of rain behind him.

"Good evening," she said politely.

"Good evening. Is Mrs. Light—is your mother in?"

He was not looking at her. His eyes were fixed on the big Vauxhall parked on the edge of the light, beside which his own shabby little car looked like a battered toy.

"I'm sorry—Mummy's engaged this evening. But she said that if you called I was to tell you she will write."

"Oh . . . she'll write?"

He looked half-pleased, half-anxious and wholly surprised.

"Yes. She told me to be sure to tell you she would write."

He said nothing for so long that she felt embarrassed.

"What a dreadful evening," she said to break the silence.

"Yes, frightful, isn't it?" and he turned slowly towards his car.

It seemed cruel to let him go away like that.

Mr. Barney left very much later—so late, in fact, that Lucinda was surprised that he did not stay to dinner. Mummy went with him to the door, and her footsteps sounded heavier as she came back into the house. She went upstairs immediately to have her bath.

Just before dinner Humfrey Malpas arrived with two books from his father: *Ghosts and Apparitions*, and *Phantasms of the Living*.

He said:

"Daddy said you wanted to know something about Dickory; but there's nothing about him anywhere."

"Then how do *you* know so much?"

"I don't know much," said Humfrey modestly; "I only draw conclusions."

"But what from? I mean, have you ever met anyone that's seen him?"

"Well, our gardener's father did. But I think he was too scared to notice him much. He said he had a purple light all round him."

(Could that have been the origin of Dickory's purple coat?)

"Whereabouts did he see him?"

"In Ember Lane, down towards Chequers Cottage."

"Has he ever been seen at Loats Farm?"

"No. Why should he?"

"Well, Harry Cobsale told me that when he was a little boy people used to frighten him with a bogey called Dickory. But he'd never heard anything about his being a highwayman."

"Well, he was a highwayman," said Humfrey obstinately. "He used to rob wealthy travellers as they crossed the marsh, and he had his headquarters at the Chequers Inn."

"Are you sure he wasn't on foot?"

"No, of course he wasn't. He was a highwayman and they were always mounted. Why are you so interested in him all of a sudden?"

Lucinda blushed. She did not know what to say; she was a truthful child, but she was determined that he should not know of her experiences with Dickory. Her very hesitancy betrayed her.

"I believe you've seen him!" he cried.

"No, I haven't." A lie, but it would be uttered. She could think of nothing else. "I'm only interested. I was talking to your father about ghosts after the film—he said he thought Dickory was impossible."

"Well, he isn't. He's real. Look here, Lucinda; how would it be if the Antiquarian Society gave a prize for the best story written about Dickory? We really ought to have some competitions, just to encourage the members."

"I don't think I could ever write a story."

"I could."

"I bet you could. But it would be fairer to have a competition that all the members could go in for."

"Even May and Cotchet?"

"Yes, even May and Cotchet."

"Then it would have to be something to do with digging, for that's about all Cotchet can do. How would it be if we dug for old iron at Hammerpots? There's lots buried there, you know—cannon balls from the Furnace, and Alard tokens. . . ."

When Humfrey had gone home, Lucinda took the books upstairs and stowed them in her bedroom, knowing that Mummy would not approve of them. Life at the moment seemed to be involving a certain amount of deceit.

It involved still more at dinner-time. Mummy was in a sweeping, aggressive mood, so different from her mood at tea-time that she refused to let Lucinda take refuge behind the little barriers of talk she had set up against Mr. Barney.

"Oh, yes, I know—you needn't tell me—these provincial Electric Palaces are more electric and more palatial than anything in London. Were you surprised when Michael Barney spoke to you?"

"Yes, very. I wish he'd come a little earlier, though, because I missed half the Silly Symphony."

"How terrible for you, poor child. I suppose you 'phoned in order to give me a chance of avoiding him?"

Lucinda blushed scarlet.

"Well, as you probably noticed, I didn't take it. This place is such a hell of boredom that anyone who isn't a bore is welcome to the house. By the way, did Greg Marlott call?"

"Yes. I gave him your message."

"It's a curse, not having anyone to answer the door. I hope Nan Scallow really will be back in a few days. If she is, it'll be the quickest baby I ever heard of."

"But there isn't a baby. She said it was 'flu—and there wasn't any baby about."

"Miscarriage, perhaps—somehow I don't believe in that 'flu. Or it may be 'quickly born, quickly die' . . . I wonder."

"Mummy—don't."

She felt quite sick. Her mother's words made Nan Scallow seem like Moll Kemp.

"Lucinda! Have I shocked you?"

"No, but you've frightened me. Please, Mummy, don't talk like that. I'd rather talk about Mr. Barney."

"Yes, of course. Let's talk about Mr. Barney. Do you like him?"

"I—I don't know."

"Why shouldn't you like him? He's made himself very agreeable to you."

The tears swam over Lucinda's eyes. Mummy was being cruel, because she was unhappy, hurting because she was hurt. She knew that her mother was wretched, wild, desperate, and she felt ashamed of herself because she could only feel angry and want to run away. She bowed her head into her hands, and wept.

"My darling." Mummy came round the table, sorry at once. "What is it, lamb?"

"Nothing—only I want—I don't want . . . Mummy, I'm all right—I'm quite all right—it's only that I don't want to talk about these things."

"You mean about Michael Barney?"

"Don't press, Mummy, don't press."

"All right, old thing, I won't. And I don't suppose we shall ever see Michael Barney again."

That was one good thing, anyway. With a desperate effort she forced back her tears.

That night she went to bed early, feeling a little ashamed of herself. She had made a scene—with her mother, too, who hated scenes and despised scene-makers. It is true that Mummy had in a great measure provoked the scene—she had teased, plagued, pressed . . . but Lucinda should have had more self-control. She should have felt more tenderness and sympathy, been strong and patient and kind and smiling as her father would have been. Then perhaps Mummy would have confided in her instead of teasing her. But no, she could not have borne that. Dreadful as it was, she would rather have been teased.

She did not want to know anything about her mother and Mr. Barney—about them either before or after her father's death. She was glad that he was not coming to Woodhorn again—if that was really

true—even though the idea of it undoubtedly distressed her mother. Was Mummy in love with him? The question was a sort of tic—a spasm of thought, outside her control—coming back and back, as it had come back and back in the days when Daddy was alive. She had refused in those days to try to answer it, but this time it might be as well to find an answer. Was Mummy in love with Mr. Barney? She could not be, or why should he not be coming back? He had sought her out—she had sent him away. Then why was she distressed? Perhaps they had had a quarrel. They had quarrelled already once, she guessed, when her father died; and Mummy had then been in terrible misery, though no doubt it was not all on Mr. Barney's account. Now they had met and quarrelled again . . . it did not seem much like love. And yet . . . and yet . . .

She must stop thinking like this. *She did not want to know anything about her mother and Mr. Barney.* If she went on thinking of them she would have horrible dreams to-night . . .

She opened the books Mr. Malpas had lent her. *Ghosts and Apparitions, Phantasms of the Living* . . . Mummy would disapprove of her reading them, especially in bed—she would say they were frightening. . . . How little she knew! Ghosts weren't nearly so frightening as people . . . and to-night they would provide a happy escape from people she wished to forget.

She settled herself against the pillows heaped behind her, candle-light in a golden cloud upon her head and shoulders and the open page. The rest of the room was a receding landscape, swallowed up by shadows a few feet from the bed. Outside the window the mysterious voice of the rain was the voice of the night itself—a quiet, urgent voice made up of many voices.

She found her books most interesting, even though they but scantily lit up the subject that filled her mind. They described appearances that were, as Mr. Malpas had told her, mainly and certainly of those at the point of death or very lately dead. These ghosts seemed all to be on their way from one world to another—like people who are leaving the house but whom you can hear moving about and talking in the hall, perhaps even calling back to you, before the hall-door shuts

upon them and they are gone. Dickory did not seem to fit into any explanation that psychical research could offer—unless it was possible to remain shut up in the hall, unable to find the door and go out. . . . And, of course, there was all that stuff about time. . . . Perhaps Dickory's time was different from hers, like a person whose watch is slow . . . or perhaps it was her mind that was out of time, a damaged watch with loose hands falling suddenly through the hours . . . or perhaps she was dreaming. There was always that last humbling explanation. Certainly, she felt, the Society for Psychical Research would never regard Dickory as "veridical." He did not come up to their standards at all.

She read for about an hour, and then she must have fallen asleep, for though she had no recollection of doing so, she found herself waking up. The room was light, and at first she thought that she had slept till morning, then that she had left the lamp on—though she could have sworn she had put it out and had read only by the light of her bedside candle. She sat up to see and suddenly, almost without any feeling of surprise, found herself looking straight at Dickory.

"Oh," she said. Then: "What are you doing here?"

She had never heard that he was supposed to haunt the Old Parsonage and she had never expected to see him in the house. He stood looking at her in his old bewildered way. That is, afterwards she remembered him as standing, but at the time she had no sense of position at all, either his or hers. All that was impressed upon her strongly was his face, red and unshaven, with the muddled, beseeching blue eyes, and round it a frame of hair cut in pudding-basin style, but straggling into locks on his shoulders. He looked what he was: the outlawed farm-hand of many years ago, the man who had murdered his master and now lived precariously by his poor wits.

An overwhelming pity filled her heart. She longed to comfort him, to help him if she could. But how could she reach him? Only with words, perhaps. Oh where are the dead and after what manner do they return? . . . She stretched out her hand and cried:

"What can I do?"

His thick voice answered her:

"Oi've coäm arter Mus' Williams."

"Who's Mus' Williams?"

"De parson, surelye. Oi'm scared and he said he'd help Oi."

So that was why he was at the Parsonage—searching for a parson who had been dead nearly two hundred years.

"I—I'm sorry," said Lucinda. "He isn't here. Isn't there anything I can do?"

He shook his head sadly.

"He promised to larn Oi a prayer. He said as if Oi coäm up to de Parsonage he'd larn Oi a prayer. But den all dis terrification starts aräound Mus' Rowfold and Oi cud never coäm till now. And now Oi can't find 'un. Oi can't find nobody—Moll Kemp's agone and all de folkses at de inn. Why is it as Oi can't find nobody and Oi'm allus running up agäunst you, Missus? You döan't belong here."

"I do. This is my home."

He shook his head.

"It queers me, allus meeting a foreigner. Mus' Williams told me to cöam and he'd to teach me a prayer säum as he prays in church—a prayer about light. Oi'm in want of a prayer about light, being all in the dark."

A thought and a memory flashed into Lucinda's mind.

"Would it be 'Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord'?"

His lost eyes brightened.

"Surelye. Dat wus de way of it—a prayer agäunst de darkness of dis night. 'Tis a long night, Missus."

She wondered then if he knew he was a ghost.

"You mustn't be afraid," she soothed him. "Nothing can really hurt you."

"Oi reckon Mus' Rowfold 'ud hurt Oi if Oi went near Loats. Oi killed 'un, but he sticks around. I dursn't go fur so much as a look at de liddle Missus. But mebbe Oi can go now, sinst Oi've larned a prayer agäunst 'un—'Lighten our darkness.'"

"That's not a prayer against him or anyone. You don't pray against people—you pray for them."

She broke off. Was she doubly assuming the part of the dead

Mr. Williams and preaching as well as praying? She did not want to preach, even to a ghost. And yet she felt that something must be done to help anyone so lost to find himself. She thought now that he considered himself as much alive as she was. . . . Would it be any good to question him, find out exactly how much and how little he knew? Or should she tell him that he was more than a hundred years out of date? That there were Cobsales at Loats instead of Rowfolds? That the Chequers Inn was now a condemned cottage? That Moll Kemp had been hanged for murdering her child and was buried out on the marsh? That he himself had been—but she did not know how he had met his end. Humfrey's legend credited him with being shot by Bow Street Runners; but Humfrey's legend was just a dainty dish served up by his imagination. She did not know how Dickory had died—whether he had been hanged or shot or starved. She wondered if he himself knew . . .

"Look here——" she began. Then she hesitated. Every question she wanted to ask him sounded impossible. . . . Do you know that you're a ghost? That I'm alive and you're dead? That you died probably more than a hundred and fifty years ago? They sounded preposterous. And did she herself really know anything about it? Did she, for instance, know where she was now? If she was in bed in her room at Woodhorn Parsonage, how was it that the wallpaper had a quaint Chinese pattern all over it instead of being the plain primrose she herself had chosen? And those books over there? And that big chest? And that funny little basin and pitcher? Whose were they? Certainly not hers. No doubt they belonged to the Reverend Mr. Williams and Dickory had made no mistake in coming here to find him.

In that case—what was *she* doing? No, she certainly couldn't ask him any of those questions; nor even that other which had begun to form itself in her mind: Am I haunting you or are you haunting me?

"Dickory!" she cried, and her voice had in it something of his own helplessness. Then she saw that he was not there. Her eyes had lost him even while they watched him. And now it seemed as if he had never been there at all, as if his presence had borne the same relation

to her sight as his voice had borne to her hearing in the passage of Chequers Cottage that very morning. The strange furniture and wall-paper were gone too, and she was lying curled up in her bed in the darkness. She could now remember clearly putting away her books, blowing out her candle and settling down for the night.

So what?

PART III

BURNING LIGHT

JESS MARLOTT

THE Sussex Border Railway is a single-line track along the marshes of the Iron river, from its source at Flattenden to the coast between Marlingate and Winchelsea. Exactly why it should have taken this course was no doubt determined for some good reason in the days when small, single-track railways were springing up all over Kent and Sussex and their Directors imagined that the transport problems of the nation would be solved as they linked market-town with market-town.

The principal station was at Potcommon, about half-way down the line, and unique in that it was within a mile of the town it served. The others were anything from two to five miles away, and only the initiated knew if it was best to alight at Bibleham Road for Drungewick or at Drungewick Road for Bibleham. The passengers travelled democratically in a class-less vehicle made of two motor-omnibuses set end to end on a railway chassis, and driven by a sort of chauffeur-engine-driver seated under the floor, his head on a level with the travellers' knees. As the last train left Flattenden soon after four it was considered unnecessary to provide any lights, and on a rainy winter's day the journey ended if it did not begin in complete interior darkness.

Outside, the weeping edges of the clouds seemed to be lit (as by light reflected from a mirror) by the gleam striking upwards from the great pale sheets of floodwater that spread across the valley. The river was wiped out—only the dark heads of pollard willows marked its course—and the little causeway of the railway seemed a fragile road across the desolation.

Jess Marlott sat with her face close to the window, looking out. She liked the little railway, and indeed found main-line trains flat and monotonous after the merry bounce along its track. She liked the

intimacy of its course through farmyards and cottage gardens. She generally used it to go to Marlingate. It cost sixpence less than by the 'bus and took only an hour longer.

But to-day she had not been to Marlingate. She had been—epochally and unnaturally—to London. She had walked in London streets, driven in London 'buses and rubbed her nose on London shop-windows for the first time for seven years. The reason for her going had added to the monstrousness of the occasion, for she had gone to consult a doctor.

Following the complete failure about a fortnight ago of the Green Kelloids to make her feel any better or suffer any less pain she had reluctantly called on old Dr. Sainsbury at Woodhorn. He had examined her very carefully and asked her a great many questions. She had asked him only one: "It's my age, isn't it?" and he had shaken his head and answered: "I don't think it's that entirely."

Apart from this he had given her very little information, but he had told her to go and see a specialist at one of the well-known London hospitals for women.

"I'll make an appointment for you. I used to know him pretty well and he's the best man there is."

"Do—do you think there'll have to be an operation?"

"I shouldn't think so. But I should like another opinion."

Jess had felt cheered, though the doctor did not speak cheerfully. She thought that he was getting too old for his work.

The expedition to London had seemed a stupendous and unnecessary fuss; but as Dr. Sainsbury was emphatic that Marlingate would not do as well, and as Greg seemed to think she had better go, she went, taking advantage of a cheap excursion train that started at seven o'clock in the morning. Now, at the close of the afternoon, she was feeling so tired that she would have been grateful if the train had bumped less heartily. But she did not want the journey to end. She felt as if she would like to sit indefinitely here in the dark, watching the twilight drift past on the water—water that spread all round her from a hill of shadows to a hill of shadows, while she flew over it, close to its gleaming surface, like a lonely bird.

This sort of travel must be rather like dying—the veiled, mysterious landscape of which one took possession in thought, the bumping track no more than the body's protest at its last ill-usage. She was not afraid of dying, though she had started and felt a sudden coldness in her mouth when she realized what the London doctor was talking about. If dying had been all . . .

But it was not, any more than this journey would last for ever. There were facts to be faced much harder than death. Just as she could not sit here for ever drifting over dusk and water, but must leave the train at Potcommon Station, drag herself up to the town and take the 'bus for Woodhorn, so she could not die—pass quietly out of the world which seemed lately to have had a grudge against her—without thinking of Greg and planning what he could do when she was gone.

How could he manage without her? He loved another woman; he was not quite sure that he had ever loved his wife at all—not as now he understood love. But that did not make him any more fit to be left to look after himself—in fact she was not sure that it did not complicate the situation almost unbearably. If only she could have thought that her death would do what a wife's death always did on the films: set the lovers free to rush into each other's arms. If only Brenda Light could love him as he loved her . . . if only she had meant one word she had written in the letter that had calmed and elated him so much . . .

But for many reasons it was difficult to believe that she could have meant it; and in that case it would have been better if she had not written at all. Jess had felt uneasy and doubtful about it from the start. But Mrs. Light had been so determined . . . and she had said things that had made Jess almost think that what she wrote might at least be partly true. . . . Then when she saw the change that the letter had made in Greg, she had felt that the more experienced woman was right. She forgot her uneasiness as she saw him almost happy again—not as peacefully and trustfully happy as in the old days when he was deceiving her, but totally different from the shambling, stricken creature that her first settlement with the foe had made him.

There was sometimes a queer sort of exultation about him, a strained

nobility, as if he saw himself as love's martyr, bound to the stake of sacrifice. Then one day a queer thing had happened—a thing that in its different way had disturbed her as much as the letter being written. She had read it—and read it, she felt sure, at his own express desire. He had wanted her to see how much he was loved, how much and how nobly he was renouncing. But he could not very well hand her the letter and say “read this.” So he had asked her to mend a hole in his coat pocket—in the old coat that he left at home when he went to market—and in that pocket she found the letter from Brenda that for days she knew he had been carrying about and reading over and over again. It had seemed incredible that he had forgotten it was there. She felt convinced that he meant her to read it; and she must have read it nearly as many times as he had. It was quite a short letter, and there were phrases in it that she knew by heart.

“... In asking you not to come again to see me I am asking you to help me. . . . Since we can never be more to each other than we are now. . . . Help me to spare myself further suffering. . . . I am putting myself and my happiness in your hands. . . .”

It was terrible to have written all that if you hadn't meant it. And as Jess still worshipped Brenda Light and still felt grateful to her for so easily and amiably releasing Greg, she tried to persuade herself that she had at least partly meant it. After all, there were things she had said at that last interview. . . . She had definitely said that she might be in danger of falling in love with him if he went on coming. . . . She had said: “I'm not at all the sort of woman to go about empty-hearted” and “You're under-rating his attractions if you think I can go on seeing him day after day for weeks without some feeling” . . . Certainly it was difficult to imagine a woman sitting for hours with a man and letting him kiss her and make love to her without getting any pleasure out of it at all. Of course there was—or rather had been—the other man. But she herself had said that it was a year since she had seen him, that she would never see him again . . . and he could not have been a good or honourable man, carrying on with her all those years behind her husband's back . . . she probably realized now that he was a cad. Greg's simplicity and integrity must appeal to her . . . no,

that would not quite do, but certainly he must offer a contrast in many ways to the man she had lost.

That was how the situation had appeared to Jess at least during the last month. That was how she wished it more than ever to appear now. If she could think that when she was dead Brenda Light would comfort Greg . . . instead of thinking how terrible it would be if he turned to her expecting comfort and found a lie. . . . Of course he would not really be in a position—socially or financially—to offer marriage to a woman like Brenda. But she could imagine the hope that would rise in him, her poor hopeful Greg; she could imagine his saying—not at once, for he was not crude or heartless, but as some later time gave him opportunity: “Darling, I am free to love you honourably. Will you make me happy at last?” And Brenda would say . . .

Jess wondered and shuddered. Somehow before she died this matter must be made clear. She had six months to work in—six months the doctor had said—about six months.

He had not meant to tell her anything at first. He had said: “I shall write to Doctor Sainsbury.” But she had been desperately anxious to know, not if she would live or die (she had never considered that alternative), but if she would have to have an operation. That would require a lot of preparation—going into hospital and leaving Greg for perhaps a whole month. . . . She would have to make all sorts of arrangements. So she had asked the doctor if he thought an operation would be necessary. He had answered: “No, I don’t think it will.”

She had felt an intense relief—for a moment, till she saw his face. He had an expressive, young-old face, and his eyes betrayed him. She had guessed then.

“You mean, you don’t think an operation would be any use?”

He had answered evasively.

So she had pressed him: “Please tell me. It’s essential for me to know what’s going to happen. I can take it.”

Then he had said:

“I’m afraid you’ve come to me rather late. There’s not much that I can do now.”

"Oh . . ." she had answered stupidly. Then added: "Will it take very long?"

"That's a difficult question. These things don't follow a prescribed rule."

"But can you give me any idea? I mean, will it be a year, or six months, or only a few weeks?"

He had said:

"Probably nearer six months."

"And will it be very——" She had meant to say "expensive," thinking of diet and nursing, but he was evidently used to another sort of question, for he replied:

"You needn't be afraid of that. There are always things we can give you to deaden pain. Medical science has gone pretty far along that road."

"I wasn't thinking of pain. I want to know if it will cost a lot. We aren't at all well off and I want to do it as cheaply as possible."

She had heard of survivors being crippled by the money they had spent on sick relatives.

"There's no need for you to spend a lot of money. If you were well off I should suggest your going in due course into a nursing home, but you have an excellent local hospital . . ."

"Then you think I'll have to go away somewhere before the end?"

That would shorten her all too short six months.

"You might require more nursing than would be easy to provide at home . . ."

. . . The train stopped with a jerk at Northease Station, the next to Potcommon, breaking up the dialogue in her head. Soon she would have to pull herself together and get out. But already her period of pleasant drifting was over. She could think of nothing but Greg, or rather of what he would do without her. It was not only his situation with Mrs. Light that worried her; a host of lesser cares crowded round and demanded her providence. The greatness of death was all eaten up by a swarm of small, nagging difficulties. She rummaged in her handbag and took out her shopping list. On it she wrote:

1. Induce Greg join Co-op. Society. Medland? Starnash?
2. See that Dec. quarter's mortgage is paid—two months owing.
3. Get Greg put by weekly rent towards mortgage.
4. See that the Incubators are started in good time—March.
5. What about day-olds?

That was all she could think of for the moment, and as the train had started again it was impossible to write. She put her list away—the list that she knew would grow longer and longer.

Seven people left the train at Potcommon, and six of them were soon driving past the seventh as she plodded along the Station Road to the town. No doubt if she had carried a bag or even a heavy parcel they would have stopped and offered her a lift. But Jess had most praiseworthily spent a day in London without buying anything and had nothing to carry but her own dog-weary body, clad in its best clothes which were tight and uncomfortable and not warm enough for December.

She walked quickly, because it was cold, and because she had only just enough time to catch the 'bus. But every now and then she faltered, for she felt stiff after sitting so long on a hard seat, and the pain, which for some reason had held off during all the jolting and bumping, now began to mutter its familiar threats. So far it had only threatened, but it seldom threatened without performance and she dreaded the thought of its charging over her while she was in the Station Road or, worse still, in the High Street. In the 'bus it would not be so bad, as she would be sitting down. . . . She must try at all risks to stave it off till she was safe in the 'bus.

The twilight of the town's approaches seemed to change into night itself as she stepped into the street-glare of the shops, already bright for Christmas and wiping the last dusk out of the sky with their lights and their neon signs in blue and red and green. It all looked inexpressibly cheerful, and suddenly her heart warmed and jumped with delight, as the thought of Christmas took her back to happy days that seemed no longer far behind. Her eyes sparkled childishly as she gazed at all the

good things and gay decorations in the windows of Potcommon's Co-operative Store.

But she had no time to linger. The clock in the Market Square struck five—her watch must be slow. If she did not hurry the 'bus would have started. Already she could see a movement in the row of shining chariots in front of the Grenadier Inn, as the chimes dispersed them to the villages. The Woodhorn 'bus was a small local affair with a journey's end no further off than Bibleham, but it was as quick off the mark as any. When Jess came lumbering and panting up it had gone.

There would be another in two hours. Till then she could go to a tea-shop and make a pot of tea last as long as she dared, or she could take a fourpenny seat in the picture house. She would rather have the tea, but the cinema would be a more hospitable refuge for two hours.

Then while she hesitated, the pain that had been tagging after her all the way from Potcommon Station, leaped upon her, rolled her over, stamped on her, broke all her bones and tore her limb from limb. That was how she felt as she stood swaying and rather faint on the pavement outside the Grenadier Inn. She put out a hand and gingerly steadied herself against a lamp-post. If only she could find somewhere less public, a place where she could hide herself till it was all over. But she did not dare move a step in case the pain suddenly became unbearable and she screamed. Suppose she screamed out there in the street . . .

Someone came up to her.

"Are you all right, Mum?"

It was a 'bus conductor. Jess mumbled something about the Woodhorn 'bus. Her voice came indistinctly through her clenched teeth, and she feared that the man would think that she was drunk.

"I—I'm all right," she gasped, "only—not—not very well."

That was what drunken people always said.

"There isn't a 'bus to Woodhorn for another two hours. I'd pop in somewheres and have a cup of tea if I was you."

Jess thanked him desperately and turned away. She would have to go into the Grenadier, though she did not know the people there and

feared the prices. But she was incapable of walking further—almost of walking so far. Then just as she had summoned enough courage to drag herself up the steps she heard another voice behind her—a woman's this time.

"Mrs. Marlott . . . aren't you well?"

"Oh, Mrs. Light . . ."

In her heart were two contrary feelings—relief at the appearance of an angel, shame that an angel should see her like this.

"I believe my hat's crooked," she muttered and pushed it still further over her ear.

"Never mind your hat," said Mrs. Light. "Come in here."

She put her hand under Jess's arm and guided her up the steps. Inside the door was a little tea-lounge, antique and oaken, with tables set about under shaded lights. Jess stumbled into the darkest corner she could find.

"Oh . . ." she said weakly.

Mrs. Light sat down beside her and her dark eyes under their level brows gave her a single quick survey which seemed to tell her everything. She spoke to a waitress who had appeared. The waitress said:

"I can't before half-past five."

"It is half-past five," said Mrs. Light, looking at her wrist-watch. "Please bring it at once. This lady's ill." Then she added: "You can tell Mr. Harman that Mrs. Light asked for it."

Jess wondered what it was that was giving everybody so much trouble. But she could not speak, though she felt better now that she was sitting down. She closed her eyes and seemed to see her pain in coloured waves passing over her, one after another, first the orange, then the yellow, then the blue, and then the green. That meant that it was passing away. The waters would ebb and she would be able to breathe again, to speak, to apologize.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured.

"I'm sorry," said Mrs. Light, "for you. How are you feeling now?"

"Better, thank you."

"It was a good thing I saw you. You looked as if you were going to faint."

"Oh, I never do faint."

"Are you often taken ill like this?"

"No—not very often. It's not so bad when I'm at home. I can lie down, you see."

The waitress arrived with the mysterious "it", which turned out to be a glass of liqueur brandy.

"There," said Brenda, "drink that. I've ordered tea to follow."

"Oh, how kind you are. But I'm afraid I'm making myself an awful nuisance."

"Not a bit. Please drink your brandy—I'm sure it's what you need."

"But do I take it just like this? Oughtn't I to have water with it?"

"No—you take it just as it is."

Jess, who had never drunk brandy neat in her life before, raised the glass rather nervously to her lips. The stuff was like fire and burnt her throat, but after that it seemed to turn to light, running through her body like a sunrise, driving away the last lurking shadows of pain as dawn dispels darkness.

"That was lovely," she said, setting down the glass.

"You must finish it."

"Oh, yes, I will—in a minute."

She had paused to savour the new world in which she found herself. The oaken lounge with its red lights seemed faintly blurred. It suddenly struck her as a delightful possibility that the brandy had gone to her head.

"Oh," she giggled weakly, "I believe I'm tipsy."

"You can't be. You've had only a gulp."

"Well, I'm not used to brandy, and it's on an empty stomach, you know."

But just to show how little she cared she tossed down the rest of the glass.

"That's good," she said, and added conversationally: "I've been in London all day."

"Have you? No wonder you're tired. Been shopping?"

"No, I went to see a doctor."

She stopped abruptly, the smile wiped off her face. Brenda Light did not speak for a moment, then she said:

"I hope he was some use."

"Oh, yes, quite a lot of use." Though, hang it all, what use had he really been?

"It's hateful being ill," continued Mrs. Light, "and we don't seem particularly well off for doctors at Woodhorn."

"I know. Doctor Sainsbury's rather old, but he's been extremely kind. So have you. I'll never forget how kind you've been. I feel perfectly all right now. I'd no idea a glass of brandy could make such a difference."

"It's useful in an emergency, though I don't suppose your doctor would approve of it as a regular prescription."

She seemed quite incurious as to the nature of Jess's illness, though she had taken so much trouble to help and relieve her.

"Here's the tea at last," she said. A new instalment of comfort had arrived. Jess watched her hostess's fingers arranging the tea-things. They were small, capable fingers, their whiteness contrasting with cherry-coloured nails. She looked down in some embarrassment at her own, and hid them under the table.

"Look here," she said, "I hope you can really spare the time for this."

"For tea? Of course. I was just thinking of going to have some when I saw you. It's nice having it together."

How kind she was! Jess's whole being, still faintly alight, thrilled with the thought of her kindness.

"It's nice for *me*," she said heartily, and set her lips to the steaming cup.

"I've been doing some Christmas shopping," said Brenda. "Of course, there isn't much one can buy in a place like Potcommon, but there are some things in that arty and crafty shop by the church that aren't bad—one's friends occasionally enjoy local produce."

"I haven't really looked at the shops," said Jess. "I was just beginning to when I saw how late it was and had to run for the 'bus."

"Did you do much shopping in London?"

"No—no—none. I looked in at Swan and Edgar's window and at Dickins and Jones, but I hadn't much time even for that. I saw the doctor at the hospital, you know, and one always has to wait."

She really wished Mrs. Light would show more curiosity, ask more questions. Then she might be able to tell her about this new problem. It would be a great relief if she could talk it over with her, partly because it was painful to have such a vital secret shut up in her heart, partly because she felt that Brenda Light could help her as no other woman could. She was kind, and, in spite of some misgivings Jess still thought that she was wise. She would no doubt, under the pressure of such a confidence, own frankly what her feelings were for Greg and what she was prepared to do for him. If it was no more than to watch over him and advise him when his wife was gone it would still be worth much.

But Brenda went on talking, almost obstinately it seemed, about shopping and Christmas, the Grenadier Inn, the cinema, London and Woodhorn, all subjects that Jess would normally have found interesting, especially in such company, but which now were merely irrelevant. Perhaps it was not well-bred to talk about illness, or perhaps she was being tactful and imagined that Jess would not like to talk about it after having been taken ill in the street; perhaps she thought that she was putting her at her ease. If that were so it might be as well to enlighten her. The first rakish effects of the brandy had passed, but Jess's veins were now coursing with hot tea, her heart sang like a kettle and her head was steamy with comfort. . . . She felt equal to tackling almost any situation.

If she was to tackle this one she must do so at once. Already they were drinking their second cups.

"Yes," she said, rather wildly, "you're right. French films put you quite out of patience with Hollywood. Not that I've ever seen one; I hardly ever go to the cinema, and now I don't suppose I shall ever go again. The doctor told me something that's upset me very much."

"Oh, really. I'm sorry. Doctors are a bore. I wish we could live without them."

"I have pretty well, hitherto. I mean I've been feeling ill for a long time, trying all sorts of things, but I didn't go to a doctor till the Green Kelloids failed. I never thought they would—the advertisement spoke so well of them—but the last bottle was useless and they're really too expensive. So I thought I'd go to Doctor Sainsbury and he sent me to this man in London who's told me that I probably shan't live more than six months."

Mrs. Light set down her tea-cup rather quickly and did not speak for a moment. Jess had the queer notion that she was shocked.

"But he'd no business to tell you that," she said at last in a voice that wasn't quite her own.

"I made him. He was going to write to Doctor Sainsbury, but I wanted to know at once."

"You should get another opinion."

"He *is* another opinion. Doctor Sainsbury examined me first and said he didn't think there'd have to be an operation. Now I know why."

Brenda was lighting a cigarette, though she had not finished her buttered scone. The conversation seemed temporarily to have died. Jess felt awkward, but she persevered. Having gone so far she was determined not to draw back.

"I shouldn't mind so much—I mean death isn't a thing I'm really afraid of and I feel very tired sometimes. I shouldn't mind so much if it wasn't for Greg and wondering how he'll manage without me."

She thought she heard Brenda say something under her breath.

"You see," she continued, "even though he's fallen in love with you he depends on me a lot—for all sorts of things, big and little. We've been together twenty years and I know his ways and he's used to me. And even I can't stop him doing stupid things sometimes. I can't think what he'll do when he's alone."

"He'll be sorry he's treated you so badly, for one thing."

"Oh, don't say that. He hasn't really treated me badly. He couldn't help falling in love, and he's been perfectly honest with me—at least, ever since I found out. I'm really terribly sorry for him, falling in love

at his age, so desperately and so hopelessly, too, in spite of that letter you wrote him."

"You saw it, did you?"

"Yes, I saw it. And now, oh how I wish I could believe you'd meant it!"

Brenda said nothing. She poured herself out another cup of tea.

"I suppose it was only what you said—a way of making him feel pleased with himself?"

"I thought it the best way of stopping him coming to see me, and by the results I seem to have been right."

"Yes, you were, in that way. But when I'm gone he'll probably think—I mean he might think he was free to love you. It would be dreadful if he hoped for that and then failed."

Mrs. Light looked at her intently.

"Do you mean that you wish now that I was in love with him?"

"Yes, as things have turned out, I do. I didn't at first. I can't tell you how relieved I was when you told me you wouldn't try to keep him. But now all my longing is for Greg to have someone to love him and look after him when I'm gone."

"I told you, didn't I, that I cared for someone else?"

"I know, and it was silly of me . . . but when I read your letter I felt—I couldn't help feeling that you must mean some of it."

Mrs. Light seemed to be upset by this.

"My God! I was only using a piece of common strategy. I'm sorry; but you really mustn't take everything quite so seriously."

"I know. But I've only just heard and one can't help being a little disturbed at first. When I've got used to the idea——"

"I didn't mean that. For heaven's sake don't think I was talking about that. I'm talking about my letter to your husband. It was a letter I wrote virtually at your request, to put an end to an impossible situation. It has been successful, and I really don't think you need worry about it any more."

"I shouldn't if things were just to go on as usual. But they aren't, and I'm so afraid he'll hope—Greg always was too hopeful."

Mrs. Light still seemed a little impatient.

"Well, I don't see what's to be done about it—not at present. Later on, if—if things should turn out badly, I could deal with him then. I should make myself perfectly plain."

"But that's just what I want to avoid. Oh, how can I bear to leave him, knowing all he'll have to suffer?"

"My dear Mrs. Marlott, we none of us can escape what's coming to us, especially when we've brought it on ourselves. Let him take his chance and think about yourself for a change."

"But, oh please, I do want you to promise me one thing. When I'm gone you—you won't turn your back on him entirely? If there's anything you can do for him, you'll do it?"

"Oh, yes, of course I'll do it. Please, please don't worry any more about him. Probably in six months' time he'll have forgotten me entirely. And remember that doctors have been mistaken many times before this. There's no need for you to be so fatalistic."

She was signalling to the waitress. No doubt she wanted to go; the conversation was upsetting her. A finger of disappointment curled around Jess's heart, but she tautened against it.

"There are hundreds of people alive to-day," continued Mrs. Light, "whose doctors gave them six months to live anything from ten to fifty years ago. Doctors are very fond of that six months. It seems to be just as much the rule as a nine months' pregnancy—nine months to be born and six months to die."

"I think it was I who suggested the six months," said Jess meekly. "I asked him if he thought he could give me some idea. He didn't want to at first."

"Well, I shouldn't believe him till I'd seen someone else. There must be other specialists in the same field. I shouldn't accept such a diagnosis till I'd seen the lot—and perhaps not even then."

"I really don't feel I want to see any more doctors at present—except Doctor Sainsbury. I'll have to see him, I suppose."

Mrs. Light stood up. She had paid the waitress and was pulling on her big fur driving gloves. As she watched her a curious thing seemed to happen to Jess, partly physical, partly mental. It was as if the blood in her veins suddenly changed its course and flowed the opposite way,

and as if all the comfortable warmth in it had become anger—burning anger against this woman who did not seem to care a damn if Greg's heart was broken.

"Do you want to powder your nose?" asked Mrs. Light, "or shall we start at once?"

"We?"

"You'll let me drive you home, won't you?"

"Thank you very much—it's really too kind of you. But I think I'd better go home in the 'bus."

"But why? We live practically next door to each other, and you'll find the car much quicker and more comfortable."

"I daren't take the risk of anyone in Woodhorn seeing me driving with you."

Mrs. Light looked astonished.

"Surely the worst Woodhorn gossip would see nothing guilty in our association?"

"But if my husband heard of it—if he hears we've been seen together . . ."

"Can't you tell him just what's happened? That I saw you looking very ill and offered to drive you home . . ."

"It wouldn't do at all. I don't think he even has an idea that you know me by sight. He'd be horrified if he knew we'd been together—even if he didn't actually guess what we were talking about. . . . No, no, please believe me. I'm right about this, and I'd far rather go home in the 'bus."

"Suppose you're taken ill again."

"I shan't be. It never comes oftener than once in four hours. I'm quite all right now till I get home."

"And are you going to tell your husband what the doctor said to you?"

"N-n-no—at least, not at once. I must think things over first."

She was still as far as ever from a solution to her problem, from an assurance as to the future. And now she definitely wished that she had not spoken so freely to Mrs. Light. She had let her tongue run away with her. It must have been the brandy . . . "talking in her cups"—the

phrase showed her to herself in a new and shameful light, which the reflection in the mirror on the wall did nothing to dispel. She saw herself standing there, flushed, untidy, dishevelled, with her wispy hair, crumpled clothes, and crooked hat, while Brenda stood before her so neat and trim and lovely, smiling and holding out her hand.

"Well, I'm afraid I must go. You'd better sit and rest here till the 'bus starts, if you really won't come with me . . ."

"No, thank you, I really won't. But please don't think I'm ungrateful for all your kindness. You've been very kind——"

She broke off foolishly.

BRENDA LIGHT

NEVER had Brenda felt more glad to be back at the Old Parsonage. The place had something of its old-time quality of refuge, as she stepped into the dimly-lit hall and saw through the open door of her sitting-room the firelight fluttering on white walls and polished furniture. To shut the front door behind her was not only to shut out the night with its cold, tossing winds, but the thoughts that had tormented her all the way home, an iron band round her head, a thorny thicket round her heart.

She was crossing the hall when Lucinda suddenly appeared.

"Hullo, Mother! Mr. Barney's just rung up."

Her refuge had failed her, as it had failed before.

"He asked if he might come round after dinner, and I didn't know what to say, so I said Yes."

Once more her heart was pricked, and she pricked in her turn.

"Another time when you don't know what to say you had better say No; it's safer."

"Don't you want him to come, then? I'm sorry."

She looked sullen rather than sorry, and Brenda thought: She hates him.

"I don't particularly want to see him to-night. I've had a tiring day. But I suppose I shall have to, as you've said he may come."

"I could ring up and explain that you're tired."

"Do you know where he is, then?"

"Yes; at the Plough."

"In Woodhorn?"

"Yes."

Oh heaven! that was much too near. She said:

"I didn't know that was a sort of pub one could stay at."

"I believe they have two bedrooms that they let occasionally. I don't suppose he's very comfortable."

No; and he's the sort of man who likes his comforts—food and drink and a good bed. She thought of him tying his tie by candle-light in front of a dark, mottled glass, she pictured his immaculate clothes hanging behind a shabby curtain against the wall, saw the shapeless bed in the shadows behind him, smelt the mixed smells of beer, linoleum and lamp oil that hung about the passage. The inn was full of her power.

"It must be hell," she said. "You'd better ring up and ask him to dinner. We haven't got much, but it will be better than anything he'd have at the Plough."

Was she weak? or was she defiant? or prudent, perhaps, choosing her own battleground.

"All right," said Lucinda, with an edge to her voice, "I'll go and do it now."

"And when you've done it, will you please tell Mrs. Shafto, and then—wait a minute, Lucinda, I haven't finished—will you bring in the drinks from the dining-room. I'm half dead."

She sank into an arm-chair, tearing off her hat.

"Have you had any tea?" asked Lucinda. "Would you rather have tea?"

"No, I've had tea—I should bloody well think I had. Sorry, darling, to be so unpleasant, but I've had tea with a woman who's been trying to make me promise I'll marry her husband when she's dead."

"Mother! Who?"

"Mrs. Marlott. I met her in the street at Potcommon looking as if she was going to die that moment. However, when she'd had some tea she thought better of it and put it off for six months."

She hated her own laughter, tearing after her words like dust after a noisy, stinking car. But she was broken with nerves, her thoughts were loose and rattling. Through their din she heard Lucinda say:

"Is Mrs. Marlott dying?"

"So she says."

"Oh, Mummy, how dreadful. What of?"

"That was never divulged. By the mystery made of it, I gather it's cancer. But the only thing she really seemed to mind was——" She pulled herself up. She must not give way to this savagery against poor Jess. The fact that her nerves had been shattered first by her and then by Michael (like having one's ears boxed: take that! and that!) was no excuse for so boulderishly exposing the poor woman, who was certainly no worse than a fool and probably much better.

"Darling," she said to Lucinda, "I'm misbehaving. I shouldn't have told you this and you must forget it. The poor soul doesn't want anybody to know."

"All right, I promise. I shan't say a word."

She went out of the room.

"Don't forget the drinks," Brenda called after her.

She lay back and closed her eyes, but there was no real darkness till she put her hand in front of them and shut out the fire. She wanted darkness; at the moment she almost wanted the darkness of death, of the only refuge that would not turn into a snare . . . or would she find that death, too, was a snare, the ultimate snare? perhaps no darker than the light behind her eyelids, red with the fire of a world scarcely shut away. . . .

She shivered, and opened her eyes. She was growing morbid, and it was nonsense to be lounging here, as if she were really tired. She was not at all tired, only upset . . . disgruntled—let's use all the stupid, ugly words—because Jess Marlott had made her feel small, ashamed of herself. And now Michael Barney had made her head sing, so that she could not forget Jess Marlott. It was not a case of one distress wiping out another. Michael's return seemed to have made her all the more conscious of the Marlotts, the need for planning the immediate future had merely added to the burden of the immediate past; and this time there was no escape, no refuge, either in light or darkness . . . she told herself again that she was morbid and wanted a drink. She would fetch one herself if Lucinda did not come soon.

She came almost at once, or rather someone came, for the step was not Lucinda's, though as light. The almost noiseless opening of the door made Brenda turn round, to see Nan Scallow.

"Hullo," she said. "Why haven't you gone home?"

For some reason she felt pleased to find Nan there. She liked her and found her presence soothing to her present mood—more soothing than Lucinda's.

"I stayed to help Mrs. Shafto with the pantry shelves," said Nan's pleasant, sing-song voice, "and then Miss Lucinda came in and said there would be company for dinner, so I said I'd stay and help with that."

"Won't your mother want you home?"

"Oh, no, madam. She'll guess I'm where I'm needed most."

She had pulled up a low table to the fire and set the drinks on it. Her movements were quick and neat. During the two months she had worked at the Parsonage she had shaped into a very promising girl, and Brenda congratulated herself from time to time on her perspicuity in engaging her, though in more candid moments she realized that it had not been so much perspicuity as desperation.

She was always agreeable, willing, quick and skilful. She had picked up some of the more showy aspects of her job almost without instruction, in spite of the efforts of Mrs. Shafto to keep her to scrubbing and cleaning. She lacked the clumsy selfishness of the local girls, just as she lacked the local turnip face and straw-stack hair. Her laughing eye and neat, black braided bun made amends even for the undefinable, undeniable smell of gipsy that rose from her flesh as mist rises from the earth. Mrs. Shafto said that she told lies and stole cigarettes, but as Mrs. Shafto always came before long to suspect her underlings of crimes against the household, Brenda did not take her accusations to heart.

She herself had never detected Nan in any evil-doing—she had evidently been wrong about the baby. . . . It seemed incredible that even a gipsy could have had a baby during so short an absence from work; and if she had, what had become of it? Yet this evening, as she watched her walk out of the room, so trim and jaunty in her coloured

overall, she wondered if a woman like herself, ungiven to suspicions of the kind, could have been entirely misled by her imagination.

Well, no matter . . . that was an old problem now—Nan Scallow's baby.

"I like that girl," she said to Lucinda when she came back.

"What girl?"

"Nan Scallow, of course."

"Oh, yes, I see—she brought in the drinks. It was her own suggestion, as I had to telephone."

"That's what I mean—she's so pleasant and useful. He's coming, I suppose—or isn't he?"

"Yes, he's coming. I said half-past seven. Is that right?"

"Quite right. Mrs. Shafto wouldn't be pleased if things were late, and I don't think it would be fair to Nan, either, as she's staying to help."

"To help with the dinner?"

"Yes. Directly she heard there was extra work she offered to stay and do it. That's why I like her."

She sat upright in her chair, sipping her whisky, looking almost cheerful. She felt refreshed both by the drink and by Nan Scallow. Lucinda, on the other hand, looked depressed. No doubt it was at the prospect of having dinner with Michael Barney. But she would have to get over that.

"Run along, child," said Brenda, "and change your dress."

"He said he wasn't dressing. He can't—he hasn't brought any dress clothes."

"I don't mean that. But you might wear something fresher than that old thing. What about your yellow crêpe?"

"All right."

"And cheer up, my sweet. You'll live through it somehow."

"Live through what?"

Lucinda was growing like Jess Marlott and Brenda nearly lost patience with her.

"Through dinner," she replied, cutting heavily, "dinner with a man you dislike."

"I don't dislike him."

She was crouching by the fire, on her heels. Her hands—long-fingered, bony, like her father's—were stretched to the blaze, her shoulders were hunched childishly into the flaxen fan of her hair.

"I don't dislike him," she repeated, her voice rising a tone higher in sudden hysterical emphasis. "I can't dislike him, for I scarcely know him. I never think of him at all. I'm not worrying about him. I'm worrying about Mr. and Mrs. Marlott."

"My dear, you needn't. That's my trouble."

"But you've told me Mrs. Marlott's ill—that she's going to die; and that she wants you to marry Mr. Marlott."

Brenda cursed her own loose tongue. It was the threat of Michael Barney that had made her suddenly indiscreet. Why had he chosen this day to force himself upon her again? She cursed him, too.

"I don't want you to think any more about that," she said in a voice that was strangely calm, considering the uproar of her feelings. "I'm sorry I told you, and I had no business to, for I don't believe she really meant it. She'd had a shock, and she hadn't got over it; and, of course, there's no doubt about it that she's very ill. But I refuse to believe that she's dying, just because a doctor told her so. She ought to have another opinion immediately."

"If—if she did die, should you marry Mr. Marlott?"

"No, of course not—not in any circumstances."

The girl must be a fool.

"Oh . . . I wish you could. I like him so much."

"I didn't know you knew him."

"I've met him sometimes when he's been here."

"Then you ought to know that he and I could never be happy together. Besides, he's. . . . Oh, damn it all, if you can't see how impossible it would be it's a waste of breath to tell you."

She really felt angry with Lucinda for being so childish. There were times when she found her daughter's simplicity almost unbearable, when she longed for the normal sophistications of seventeen.

"Sorry, Mummy, if I'm stupid. It's only that he looked so miserable when I saw him last. And I'm sure he's desperately in love with you. Still, that's no reason for marrying him, I suppose."

"No, of course it isn't; and if you go through life on that system you'll crash before you're twenty. But never mind now, darling. I didn't mean to snap. It's seven o'clock; so go and make yourself lovely. I shan't change."

This time Lucinda went obediently and Brenda poured herself out another drink.

She must somehow get her mind in tune for Michael, pitch the right, clear note of evasive flippancy. Her thoughts reacted to him now, away from the Marlotts. What had made him come down here again, when she had told him so firmly that she had not changed? Plainly he did not believe her.

That was bad. The determination, pugnacious determination of his character was moulded in his face; in his short, defiant nose, square chin and low, wide forehead. His very hair seemed to sprout with it, thick and wiry. His shoulders were broad with it, his flanks lean with its energy, his voice rang with it—how should she escape?

True, he had left her alone for a year; but that showed only that he could play a long game as well as a quick one. He had sense enough to know when his efforts would be wasted. Evidently something had told him that they would not be wasted now. She tried to recall exactly all that she had said and he had said at their last meeting. As far as she could remember she had merely repeated, though with less bitterness and more calm, the words and phrases that had sent him from her a year ago. A year ago she had said: "After what's happened, I can't bear the sight of you." A month ago she had pleaded: "Why rake up everything again when we're beginning to be peaceful? I shall never change."

Had she changed? She had certainly changed once before, when such sweetness had turned suddenly to such bitterness. A year ago she had really hated Michael. But did she hate him now? She could not truthfully say that she did. She was disturbed by him, distressed by him, in a manner afraid of him. . . . She would not have been afraid of him if she had hated him. He was dangerous to her now in a way that he could not have been dangerous a year ago. If he still loved her and she had ceased to hate him. . . .

No, no, it couldn't happen. All that was impossible. Even the quiet house seemed to cry out in protest and condemnation. Words of which she did not normally acknowledge the validity muttered in the fire and ticked in the clock. Right-wrong . . . tick-tock . . . right-wrong . . . tick-tock. . . . It was in this room that old Aunt Derry used to sit on Sunday afternoons, reading a book in a faded purple cover, a book wherein right and wrong held undisputed sway. "Listen, dear. . . . No, we'll skip that bit, because it's sad. But Harry's mother died, because he was disobedient. If he had not done wrong it would never have happened". . . Right-wrong . . . right-wrong . . . tick-tock . . . tick-tock . . .

The room seemed full of the bygone scene, which asserted itself over the modern furniture, the painted walls, the tray of drinks and the gramophone. Was it true, she wondered, that during her stay here thirty years ago something had been done to her that could never be undone? Was little Brenda Champion still alive, though no bigger than her conscience? . . . If so, it would account for a great deal that had baffled and annoyed her in herself and that had, both a year ago and last month, exasperated Michael . . . "So Brenda's husband died, because she was disobedient. If she had not done wrong it would never have happened" . . . Oh God. . . . She suddenly felt the tears rushing to her eyes, with the longing to feel Aunt Derry's black satin arms about her and her black lace bosom under her cheek: "Listen, dear" . . . and the purple book drones on—trite, conventional, stupid, stuffy, but mysteriously reflecting lights from a shining, hidden land. It was those lights, which she had never clearly seen and never completely lost, that were confusing her now as she groped her way.

She stood up. She must go and see to her face. Michael would soon be here.

Dinner was over, and had been about as successful as any meal can be when each member of the company is presenting to the others no more than carefully posed externals.

Of the three, Barney had talked most genuinely, telling Brenda and

Lucinda of his coming visit to New York, where he was being sent after Christmas to open the new American branch of a London publishing firm. That was encouraging as far as it went, but Brenda felt that he would not leave without a determined effort to take her with him. Probably that effort was the purpose of his sudden visit to Woodhorn.

Such a surmise was bound to add to her difficulties, and brought her more than once to a troubled silence. But curiously enough she felt less on the defensive against Barney than against Lucinda. Her daughter sat primly, talking very little, giving Brenda a curious sensation of being watched. She was perfectly amiable and in fact seemed more than once to make a deliberate, if unsuccessful, attempt to be cordial to Michael. But by the end of the meal her mother was finding her the more awkward companion of the two. It was almost as if she and Michael were in league together under the eye of a silent, watchful third. Contrary to her expectations she felt relieved when Lucinda went early to bed.

Directly she was gone he turned to her and said:

"Your daughter doesn't like me. How much does she know about us?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"In the old days I sometimes asked myself how much she guessed, and now I think that it must have been more than either of us suspected."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said Brenda slowly. "She's an intelligent child—though you wouldn't always think it from her conversation—and she adored her father. If she had guessed that you and I were doing him any sort of injury, she would have hated us both."

"Both?"

He looked surprised.

"Yes, both. No doubt she's got some sort of a superficial affection for me, or we couldn't live together here like this; but underneath it all I'm convinced that she's never forgiven me for Nicky's death. Fundamentally she hates me as much as she hates you."

Her voice shook with bitterness, and rising quickly he came over to her and stood behind her chair, looking down on her face.

"Brenda—my poor, sweet Brenda. I'm not going to leave you here suffering like this."

"I shouldn't suffer any less if I went away."

She suddenly resolved to have things out with him. This new decision to go to America had made futile all the defences she had planned. There was no longer anything to be gained by manœuvring for position, even if she had not lost so much ground at dinner. She had better bring the whole thing to an end with a short, decisive action.

"Please don't stand there," she said, "where I can't see you."

"You can see me perfectly well if you want to."

Without thinking she looked up. She saw his eyes, both soft and angry, above her; then suddenly they were close, a darkness in which she was blind as his mouth came pressing down on hers. It was not a loving kiss; she was conscious above all of the hardness of his face, of his teeth bruising her closed lips, of his bones against her cheeks—a kiss from a skull. At first she was too surprised to move and then she was taken by a queer surrender: not to the present moment but to others like it long past. It left her and she tore her face from under his, burying it in the cushion of the chair, while with her lifted arm she pushed him from her, her hand against the wall of his chest.

He was gone, leaving her with her arm extended in an empty gesture of repulse. She started up, suddenly furious, and saw him leaning against the mantelpiece at least two yards away. He was lighting a cigarette.

"My God, Michael! This is too much."

He followed her glance to the uncurtained window.

"You're afraid the neighbours will see us? I didn't know you had any. But I'll draw the curtains if you like."

"Don't be a fool. You know what I mean."

She stood up and in the oval glass above the fire-place she saw herself looking both angry and defenceless.

"Come, Brenda," he said in a familiar voice of friendly argument, "I had to do something to get the conversation to the point."

"I was just bringing it to the point when you interrupted me."

"I'm sorry I missed your point."

Their eyes suddenly met and they laughed.

"Forgive me, Brenda—and come with me to New York."

She turned away from him, walking slowly back to her chair.

"It's no good, Michael—no earthly good. I know it's what you've come for, but it can't happen. Surely after what I've told you about Lucinda you see that it can't."

"You haven't told me anything about Lucinda that, in my opinion, makes the slightest difficulty."

"Not when I've told you that she hates us both? She's on the defensive now as it is; if we married she would loathe us utterly. It would be fine for us three to be living together then."

"Surely if she hates us she isn't compelled to live with us. She must have relations or friends she could go to? . . . Not that I shouldn't love to have her with us. I think her a very attractive child and not nearly so sinister as you make out, even though she does dislike me. Actually that's a point in her favour—I shall enjoy making her adore her stepfather."

"You don't know what you're talking about. You always think you can do everything you want."

"Because I know I can. If I can't I don't want it. The fact that I want to make Lucinda like me makes me know that I can."

"If I believed you . . . but I don't. And I refuse to rob her twice."

"What are you robbing her of?"

"Her mother—to match her father last year."

He moved a few steps closer and again she could feel him looking down at her as she sat with her hands clenched between her knees, her head twisted away from him towards the fire. He said:

"Isn't this a new scruple?"

"I'm not dealing in scruples."

"But you are—that's just what you are. If you think you're being

realistic, you're mistaken. There's something at the back of your mind that's tormenting you, that's creating a guilty conscience for you. You're afraid to take your chance of happiness because you feel it hasn't been honestly come by."

"How little you really know me——" she began; then faltered as she heard the clock tick. "Can't you understand," she continued after a pause, "that I feel that I never *could* be happy with you? You don't seem to realize that I loved Nicky."

"We were talking about Lucinda a minute ago."

"I know, and we're talking of her still. She and Nicky are together in this—innocent sufferers for our sins."

He sat down in the chair opposite her, and she saw his face creased with puzzled lines, which were also lines of amusement. His strength could be read in the fact that all through their argument he had never ceased to be a little amused.

"My sweet," he said very seriously, "you're using some strange words to-night. Is it because we're in a parsonage? This is the first time, I think, that I've heard you talk of sins."

She said nothing, and for a time all that could be heard was the ticking of the clock.

"If you were a religious woman——" he began.

She was still silent and he went on:

"When I was in Italy I heard about a young fellow—the son of rather a highly-placed family—who'd killed another man in some sort of a quarrel. I don't know the rights of it, but he got off with a year's imprisonment, so I suppose it was only manslaughter—it may have been self-defence. But when he came out of gaol nothing would satisfy him but to sell up everything he'd got and make it over to the chap's widow. Then he went into a monastery to spend the rest of his life expiating what he'd done and praying for the dead man's soul. Now I can understand all that. He was religious and he was simply putting his religion into practice. He was making practical amends to the people whose breadwinner he had taken away and he was doing everything in his power for a soul which no doubt he thought he had sent out of the world unprepared. The whole thing,

from his point of view, was based on logic and common sense. But your idea isn't. You're making a sacrifice very like his, but it doesn't mean anything because you don't believe any of the things he believed. You don't believe that you're helping your husband in his eternal state, and you're not making any practical provision for Lucinda. You're acting as if you were under the compulsion of a religion you haven't got—and that's silly, my sweet, and damned unfair to both of us."

All Brenda could say was:

"You don't understand."

"Of course I don't. There's nothing to understand. It's all emotional. You've come down here and hidden yourself in very much the same mood as my young chap went into his monastery; but with you it's only a mood. You've no vows to bind you and no beliefs, and in a few months you'll snap out of it—if you haven't already snapped out. Don't tell me you're living a life of penance and expiation. If you were you wouldn't be flirting again so soon."

"Flirting—what do you mean?"

"That poultry fellow—I don't know his name, but I've heard about him."

She was stunned.

"How can you have heard?"

"In the bar of the Plough, if you want to know, my lovely. Don't get angry; they were quite pleasant chaps and directly I told them I knew you they begged my pardon and shut up. But I'd heard enough to gather that you've started to amuse yourself again."

She turned crimson. She was furious.

"This is a bloody little place. I knew the tabbies were gossiping about me, but I'd no idea I'd got into the bars."

"The bars probably started first. It's only natural, my dear. You must be very innocent if you expect to come to a small village and not be gossiped about. But I'm sorry for the poultry farmer."

"You needn't be. I haven't set eyes on him for two months."

"Over so soon?"

"Yes; your pub evidently doesn't get the hot news."

"Oh, well. . . ." He took his pipe out of his pocket. "Do you mind if I smoke this?"

"I'd rather you went away."

"Darling, you're not very hospitable. It's only half-past nine. Besides, I haven't yet proposed to you. I came here to ask you to marry me and leave this odious, gossiping village, where quite rightly you're bored stiff—so stiff that you flirt with the tradesmen—and come with me to New York, either with or without Lucinda—who, I can almost promise you, out there will marry within the year, so it won't really matter if she hates us or not."

"Thanks, but your offer is too frivolous to tempt me."

"My sweet Brenda, I've taken you seriously for a year. I've already explained to you why I can't take you seriously any longer."

"You've made no effort to understand my position."

She was falling back on stereotyped female reproaches, and though she would not look up she felt he must be smiling as he asked:

"Is this the Brenda that I used to know?"

Her question had a still greater air of inconsequence.

"How long are you staying here?"

"I can't tell you—unless you tell me."

She suddenly felt anxious.

"You surely aren't meaning to stay more than a night?"

"I've told the people at the inn that I can't give them any definite period for my visit. I'm writing a book and may want the room till after Christmas."

"Good God, Michael! You must be mad."

"Not so much mad, my dear, as tough."

"But what about your people—your affairs? I don't believe you're really writing a book."

"Oh yes, I am—for Lotts' new Cornet series. Fifty thousand words on Count Corvo, whose tracks I was on during some of last year. It will fill my time up nicely when I'm not with you."

She was silent, listening to the clock.

III

LUCINDA LIGHT

As a child Lucinda had thought her birthday came too near Christmas; the big lamp of Christmas had washed out all its pretty candle-light. Friends and relatives had a way of sending combined presents for the two and Mummy said it was impossible to give two parties so close together.

But as she grew older she and her father had come to make a sort of special celebration of their own. He had told her that only very special people are born on the thirteenth of December, which is St. Lucy's day and the first day of the Scandinavian Yule.

“Lucy Light! Lucy Light!
Shortest day—longest night . . .”

The old rhyme always came back to her now with the memory of his voice. Lucy Light had been his own particular name for her—the light which had come into the darkness of his age, the shortest day lying in the arms of the longest night. And when she had argued that the shortest day was not till later in the month, he had told her that the shortest day is the darkest, and the Northern world is darker in mid-December than at Christmas time, when the sun comes out of Baldur's Gate to start his new journey across the heavens. Lucy Light! Lucy Light! . . . He had called her his shining light—shining in the darkest, stormiest part of the year.

That was why she would have been pleased if no one, especially Mummy, had noticed her eighteenth birthday. But of course she could not really expect that. This year Mummy had made a point of asking her what she'd like to do by way of celebration.

"I don't know that I really want to do anything."

Her mother had seemed irritated.

"Why not? It's an important birthday. You're grown-up at eighteen."

"I don't feel grown-up."

"Well, it's time you did, my lamb. Do have a try."

It had ended in her saying that she would like to do something with the Malpases in Potcommon, which had annoyed her mother still more. But Lucinda, now she had decided, insisted; for she was afraid that her mother might suggest Mr. Barney's taking them somewhere—to the pictures in Marlingate or even up to London for the day.

"Please let me. They'd enjoy it so much, and so would I. We could have lunch at the Mikado, and then we could go to the pictures, or do our Christmas shopping—I haven't done any of mine yet."

"My dear, what a ghastly programme. And aren't your friends at school all day?"

"We'd have to wait till the Saturday, but that wouldn't matter. Wednesday is early-closing."

"But there's nothing worth buying in Potcommon."

"Oh, don't you think so? I think some of the shops are rather good."

She spoke anxiously, defending herself against the danger of being taken up to London, to see the big stores all crowded and lit up for Christmas. Every year Daddy had taken her round the stores and they had visited all the Christmas Bazaars. They had had their tea in hollied palaces, decorated in all the candy colours and had bought numberless unofficial Christmas presents for each other, to be secretly bestowed, apart from the official tennis racquet or dolls' house. The memory, composite and complete, filled her with such unbearable longing that she bit her lips and turned pale in her fight against tears. Her mother must have guessed at least something of what she felt, for she said kindly:

"Very well. It's your own birthday, so celebrate it your own way."

But in the end it was her way—at least the start of it—for the original plan of going over all together in the 'bus and having lunch

at the Mikado Café was suddenly and splendidly enlarged by Mr. Barney's offer to drive them in his Vauxhall and give them lunch at the Grenadier Hotel. Mummy would come too, and they would all have a birthday lunch together, and then she and Mr. Barney would go home, leaving the others to their devices.

Lucinda was disturbed, but the Malpases were uproariously delighted. It turned out that none of them had ever had lunch in a hotel before, and she saw that she could not without the blackest treachery and cruelty say or do anything to convince Mr. Barney that they would much rather stick to the original plan.

He was always doing things that he thought she would like—arranging trips to the cinema, taking her and Mummy out to luncheon in Marlingate or Bulverhythe, making himself agreeable to her friends. He had even subscribed five shillings to the Antiquarian Society, thus enabling the members to provide ices at their Annual Meeting. He seemed to want to please her, and yet she did not think he really liked her.

She certainly did not like him, and sometimes her heart sickened at the thought of what might happen some day. Her mother had told her that she was not going to marry Mr. Barney; at least she had said: "You needn't be afraid, child. You're not going to have a stepfather just yet." But she was going about with him just as much as she used to in London, and he came even more often to the house.

Of course there was no reason now why they should not go about together—nor, come to that, why she should not marry him. Lucinda sometimes told herself that her father would have wanted her mother to marry again. He once had said to her: "Your mother loves life and gaiety, and I love her to have what she loves, even though I keep out of it myself." Certainly Mummy could not live without a man around, and it was better no doubt for her to marry Mr. Barney than to flirt with poor Mr. Marlott. Nevertheless, in spite of these considerations Lucinda shrank from the prospect; especially as it would doubtless involve their going all three to New York, away from this place where she found life so full of interest and contentment. Mr. Barney, in spite of all his kindness, was her enemy—as once he had

been her father's. It was this last thought that made her heart knock angrily and almost turned her dislike of him to positive hatred. . . . It hurt her to hate him and she struggled not to do so. She tried especially not to hate him on this expedition to Potcommon, which she guessed he had planned especially to please her.

The luncheon at the Grenadier turned out to be an even more practical arrangement than when it first was planned; for just before the chosen day Nan Scallow disappeared—this time for good. It had all started rather suddenly with Mrs. Shafto bursting into the dining-room while Lucinda and her mother were at lunch, and saying:

"May I speak to you, madam?"

She spoke in what Lucinda called her buttoned voice: that is a voice which seemed to be straining like the buttons on her bodice to prevent a mountain bursting. Mummy answered coolly:

"Yes, certainly, Mrs. Shafto. What is it?"

"It's difficult for me to say before Miss Lucinda."

"Then you had better wait till after lunch."

But evidently Mrs. Shafto could not wait till after lunch.

"It's that Nan Scallow. Either she must go or I do."

"Why should either of you go?"

"Well," said Mrs. Shafto mysteriously, "I'm a pure woman."

"Surely nobody's been questioning that?"

"No, but it's doing my reputation no good to be in the same house with a girl who's——" She broke off, glaring at Lucinda.

Mummy smiled rather acidly, and the next minute Mrs. Shafto charged.

"It all comes of us not going to the local tradesmen. I'd have heard about this weeks ago if we'd been like any other family in Woodhorn and dealt at Farable's. But we've got to be different and go to Potcommon, where the shops don't deliver so as they can be relied on and neither know nor care what goes on round here."

"That's one good reason for going to them. But do come to the point, Mrs. Shafto. What's happened? No, I'm not going to send Miss Lucinda out of the room."

For a moment Mrs. Shafto's bosom heaved with the struggles of her indignation against her sense of propriety. Lucinda was afraid that propriety might win, but so short was the battle that it evidently hadn't a chance.

"That girl," she burst out, "she had a baby last month."

"Are you sure?" said Mummy.

"Sure? Why, it's known all over the village, in every house but the house where she's working. And we shouldn't know now if May from the Rectory hadn't hopped over with Mrs. Malpas's compliments and could I lend them a loaf of bread till this evening when the baker calls? She sees Nan through the open door, sitting at her dinner in the kitchen, and she says to me: 'You've still got her, then,' and I said: 'Of course—our maids stay,' and she says, the impertinent creature, 'Till the police comes for them'—and she'd no cause for impertinence as I'd given her the loaf as soon as she asked for it. So I says, 'What are you insinuating?' and she says, 'If you go down to Chequers Cottage you'll see the police digging in the garden for the baby she buried last month.'"

Mummy said:

"My gosh!"

"Yes, madam. I got it all out of her, and I understand it's known all over the village. Apparently she had it that time when we thought she was having 'flu—and she never so much as asked to see the District Nurse. They say her mother saw to her"—she had evidently forgotten all about Lucinda, who listened in a sort of bewildered sickness—"and between 'em the baby was born dead, or if it wasn't—well, anyway, they buried it in the garden."

"Oh, no," cried Lucinda, "that was Moll Kemp."

Both her mother and Mrs. Shafto looked at her in surprise, but luckily they were too deeply absorbed in their conversation to waste any time on her. Mummy immediately asked:

"But why has nothing been done before this?"

"Oh, there's been anonymous letters to the police, May says. But you know what police are: they don't like to do anything till it's all been proved to them. I suppose they've got some evidence at last."

"Well," said Mummy, "even now I can hardly believe it's true. Did *you* suspect when she first came here that she was going to have a baby?"

"No, madam, I didn't; or I should certainly not have passed it over."

"I'll confess to you now that I had my doubts; but I spoke to Mrs. Malpas, who hears all the gossip in Woodhorn, and she didn't know anything about it, so I thought I must be mistaken."

How crafty Mummy was, hiding her treachery from Mrs. Shafto; who rejoined, however:

"She isn't the one you should have gone to. It's the village people. If only we'd dealt at Farable's I'd have heard it all at the back door, and we shouldn't be in the oomiliating position we're in now."

Mummy suddenly lost her temper.

"Hold your tongue, Mrs. Shafto! If we'd dealt at Farable's you'd have been the first to complain. Please send Nan Scallow to me at once."

Mrs. Shafto marched out of the room with a glance at Lucinda which showed that she had remembered her again. Even her mother seemed to think it unsuitable that she should stay any longer, for she said:

"I think you'd better let me see her alone."

"Yes, perhaps I had."

She did not want to stay. Already the cloud in which Nan Scallow moved seemed to be in the room—the corners were growing darker. . . . She rose quickly from her chair, but before she could leave the table, Mrs. Shafto was back again.

"She's gone!" she cried. "She's gone! Left her dinner on her plate and bolted. She must have heard May telling me at the back door or else me talking in here."

Mummy shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh well, that settles it. This time, I take it, she's gone for good."

"I hope the police get her before she's gone far."

"If they do, she's in for murder, I suppose."

There was brief, appalled silence.

Lucinda, looking into the darkness of Nan Scallow's cloud, saw Moll Kemp's grave.

After this life seemed to be full of Nan Scallow—the noise of her, rather, for she herself had totally disappeared. She was not at Chequers Cottage, from which her mother had vanished too. The police were searching their rooms as well as the garden—both unsuccessfully, by popular account. No one had seen Nan since she ran away from the Old Parsonage, and her mother had not been at Chequers Cottage when the police arrived. They had waited a long time, but she never came back.

Early in the afternoon Mrs. Malpas appeared, fermenting with curiosity. She asked nearly as many questions as the police when they called later. She as well as Mrs. Shafto seemed to think that Lucinda should not be in the room; but the police had other notions of decorum—or rather, they doubtless thought that decorum must give way to necessity. For in some ways Lucinda was an important witness; she had visited Nan when she was supposed to be having 'flu, but was really having the baby. What had the girl said about herself? Did she seem to have anything on her mind? Was there anything that, on looking back in the light of recent events, seemed to point to what had really happened?

All the time they were questioning her Lucinda was thinking of the woman she had seen digging in the garden. Should she tell them about it? It might have been someone burying the baby. . . . The police had been digging all day, but had still, according to local report, found nothing. Should she tell them to try just outside the little shed? . . . She hesitated, but decided to hold her tongue unless questioned directly on the subject. She disliked the position of informer—in spite of the horrible thing that Nan was said to have done—and she could not be sure if the woman she had seen was "real." She certainly was not old Mrs. Scallow, and no one else was suspected of any complicity in the affair. Lucinda had seen her just as Chequers Cottage was on the verge of "changing"—a moment later she had found herself in that mysterious, silent tap-room—and perhaps the

woman in the garden had belonged to the Old Country. She might even have been Moll Kemp herself. . . . It was rather late in the day to send the police after Moll Kemp.

Nan Scallow—Moll Kemp. . . . It was all very puzzling and frightening, and when she thought about it she could find only questions. Was it mere chance and coincidence that two women living in the same house two hundred years apart had both killed their new-born children? Or had it anything to do with the place itself, which certainly seemed malevolent—as malevolent as the gable-end of Loats? Or did events repeat themselves at intervals like designs in a pattern?

She even asked herself if it wasn't possible that Humfrey Malpas might have invented Moll Kemp . . . but no; the local guide-book, *Rambles Round Woodhorn*, written by Mr. Malpas's predecessor at the Rectory, vouched for the fact that "Moll Kemp's grave marks the place where a local woman was buried after being hanged for infanticide in 1738." Moll Kemp had better credentials than Dickory.

This brought up a new question: had she any evidence beyond Humfrey's word for believing that Moll had been a servant at the Chequers Inn? The guide-book had said nothing about this. It was Humfrey who had produced the story of her being a maid at the Inn when it was a resort of highwaymen, including the gay and gallant Dickory. Since he had been so grossly wrong about Dickory he might be equally wrong about Moll Kemp. And yet she herself had met Dickory at the Chequers Inn, trying to find Moll Kemp to warn her of the police who were after them both. Had that been merely an hallucination based on Humfrey's legend, or did it belong to a part of experience which she felt almost convinced was real, though attached to a world outside conventional reality?

One morning, the morning of a windy day, when the branches of Harbolets Shaw were rattling together like bones, she went to the familiar place in the hedge and looked through the bare twigs, over the roofs of Loats Farm, towards the marsh. For quite a long time nothing happened, and she was beginning to wonder if either she or the place had lost power when she suddenly noticed that the big, black

oast-house at Loats had disappeared, and that the country-side beyond it hung like a painted cloth, without bulk or distances.

She watched it slowly develop a third dimension, and when at last it was fully stereoscoped she looked down towards Four Legged Crouch and the Chequers Inn. It seemed much as usual, with the boat-shaped wagons drowsing in front of it; but as she gazed she became aware of some distant commotion. She could see nothing, merely sensed an approaching danger, which became real when a group of horsemen appeared on the marsh road, galloping over Puddledock Bridge. As usual everything was silent; she could not hear the rattle of their hoofs on the road. But evidently the people in the inn could hear, for terror spread among them. Again she saw nothing, merely sensed confusion and anguish behind the walls.

Then suddenly the door burst open and a man rushed out. She watched him running—running up the hill towards her; she could see him running through Harbolets Shaw even though the trees were dense and green. But it was not till he was out of the shaw that she realized he was Dickory. He came running up the field, his hair dragged off his forehead by the wind, his eyes starting like a hare's, his face distorted with terror. He did not seem aware of her, and she had a sudden horrible conviction that he would run *through* her. As far as he was concerned she was not there, nor was the hedge, which had been planted since his day.

She felt as if she would faint with fear—fear and an extraordinary revulsion which made her flesh shudder and creep—but she was quite unable to move. She was as powerless to move out of his way as if she were a painted figure in a picture. On he came and the world went suddenly dark, with a dreadful scream—her own—splitting the darkness. She screamed again and seemed to wake up. She was looking through the hedge at Harry Cobsale.

"Hullo!" he said. "I'm sorry if I scared you, but I thought you saw me come up."

"N-no. I didn't see you."

She stood upright, looking at him over the top of the hedge, for it seemed ridiculous to be peering at him through it.

"Seen anything in there?" he asked.

How could she answer him?

"I thought I saw a bird's nest," she faltered. A lie, and a lame one. He grinned at her.

"You *are* a queer girl."

"What are *you* doing?" she asked him.

"I came out to see if I could pick up a coney"—he was carrying a gun—"and then I saw something moving behind the hedge, so I came up to have a look at it. Once again, I'm sorry I scared you."

She did not speak for a moment, because over his shoulder she could see what seemed to be workmen and ladders against the walls of Chequers Cottage.

"What's happening down there?" she asked.

He turned to look, and she thought his expression changed.

"They're pulling it down."

"Why? Is it to——"

"There's been a demolition order for it out a year or more, but the people in it couldn't find anywhere to go. I heard they all moved out last night."

She wondered if he would say anything to her about Nan Scallow, but rather to her surprise he did not. She herself felt reluctant to begin. All she said was:

"It's a dreadful old place. I'm glad they're pulling it down."

He exclaimed almost savagely:

"It should ought to have been pulled down years ago."

He was standing close enough for her to see where the tanned skin of his face ended suddenly in a weathered line above the whiteness of his neck. Red-brown hairs sprang from it like wire, and there seemed to come from him, from his hair, his skin, even his clothes, an exhalation of strength, of ardour, of virility, which for a moment almost overpowered her. She had never felt anything like it before, and once again her heart pumped with fear—a fear which was different from the fear she had felt when Dickory rushed up the field towards her, and yet was mysteriously allied to it. Suppose he should touch her. . . .

She would be as powerless to escape as when she thought Dickory would pass through her. But he did not touch her; he merely turned to her and said:

"Why don't you come down to the farm? I reckon Joan 'ud be middling pleased to see you."

She felt as if she would like to go—like it above all things. She hesitated . . . then suddenly thought of Loats' blind gable-end hanging over the yard. In a moment thought had become vision; she seemed to see it, and it looked as dark and dangerous as Chequers Cottage.

"Thank you very much, but I must be getting home. I'm late as it is. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, then."

As she turned from the hedge she thought she heard him mutter to himself:

"You *are* a queer girl."

Two days later she met him again. This time it was in the 'bus, coming back from Potcommon. It seemed strange to meet him there. Hitherto all their encounters had been out of doors or in one of the buildings at Loats Farm. He looked quite different in the 'bus, wearing a ready-made suit and rather cheap-looking brown shoes. It was difficult to connect him in her mind with the strange tide of feeling that had rushed over her and frightened her at the hedge by Harbolets Shaw. She certainly felt nothing like it now, though she was sitting close to him.

She had not seen him before she sat down. She and the Malpases had only just succeeded in catching the 'bus. They had tumbled in, their arms full of parcels, some of which had dropped on the floor or on the laps of the other passengers. There had been a lot of "I beg your pardon" and "Excuse me, miss" and "Oh, I say," and it had ended in Humfrey standing on the platform beside the conductor, while Petronilla and Leonora found seats near the door, with Nigel, who was small enough to sit on Petronilla's knee. Lucinda had made her way to the only other empty seat, which was at the far end, near the driver. She had a parcel hanging on every finger and it was some

time before she could settle herself and look up; when she did so she saw Harry Cobsale.

"Hello," he said smiling, "who'd have thought of meeting you here?"

He was sitting opposite her, with a big parcel on his knee. She wondered if he had been doing his Christmas shopping too.

"Oh, how do you do. I never saw you when I came in—there's such a crowd."

"Very nearly missed the 'bus, didn't you?"

"Yes—we had to run for it. I've been shopping all the afternoon with the Malpases."

"Got what you wanted?"

"Yes—n-no. . . ." She hesitated. She had been very pleased with the things she had bought, and yet her general feeling was of dissatisfaction. She said: "I've been buying Christmas presents."

He grinned.

"So have I."

"Oh, have you? I wondered what that big parcel was."

Harry said nothing, but he looked pleased.

Lucinda wondered what he was thinking of, but evidently he would not tell her in front of the other passengers. They were sitting facing each other in two double seats, she beside an old woman, he beside a little girl. For a time they rumbled on in silence. She felt tired after her crowded day. The lunch at the Grenadier had been a great success as far as the Malpas family was concerned, but she herself had not enjoyed it much. She had always a feeling of weight and strain in Mr. Barney's company—as if everything she did or said were pushing against a closing door . . . one of those doors which are weighted so that they won't stay open of themselves. Then about half way through the meal she had dropped her napkin, and groping for it on the floor she had seen his foot pressing against her mother's under the table. Her mother had immediately taken her foot away, but that might only have been because she saw Lucinda stooping. . . . She wished she could forget what she had seen, but, doubtless just because she wished so hard, she could not get the incident out of her head.

The old woman and the little girl left the 'bus together at Waxend corner, and Harry and Lucinda were alone on their two seats. He stretched himself.

"That gives me more room," he said. The next minute he tapped the package on his knee. "Guess what I got here."

"You've told me," she said smiling. "It's a Christmas present."

"But guess who it's for."

He looked so pleased with himself that she ventured:

"For your young lady?"

"I haven't got a young lady—not at the moment. But it's a lady's present all right."

"For your mother, then, or your sister?"

"If it was for them I shouldn't feel so pleased with myself."

He certainly looked pleased; he had the air of a man who thinks he has done something rather smart.

"I'll tell you," he said the next minute. "It's for Joan."

She was surprised and a little uneasy.

"But I thought she wouldn't speak to you."

"She'll speak to me after this. It's a work-basket, all lined with blue satin and fitted out with scissors and needles and thimbles and such. She's got nothing of her own but a broken old bag."

"But what will your brother say?"

"I don't care what he says. If he's angry I'll be pleased."

Lucinda felt worried. Though she and Joan never discussed and hardly ever mentioned the family quarrel, she knew how bitter it was, especially between the captains of the two sides. That innocent, blue satin work-basket would be in the nature of a bomb thrown into the midst of the Cobsales.

"But she won't be expecting anything from you. . . . Do you really think you're wise? I mean, it's no business of mine, but unless you really want to make friends with your brother . . . and even then, some other way of doing it might be better."

"I don't want to make friends with Richard. The present's for her, not him. A month ago I promised myself I'd buy a Christmas present for the little Missus."

Lucinda could not speak. His last three words seemed to have punched her right out.

"She has a middling poor time of it," he continued, "he shouldn't have brought her to Loats, knowing how everything was. And he never spends a shilling on her himself. She'll be lucky if he gives her a pocket handkerchief as a Christmas box."

She passed her tongue over her dry lips. Moll Kemp—Nan Scallow . . . Dickory—Harry Cobsale. She saw it clearly now—the gable-end of Loats as threatening as Chequers Cottage. . . . Oh, what can I do to prevent *this* happening again? . . . She began almost wildly:

"I know I haven't any right to interfere. But won't it make it all the worse if you give her something expensive and he doesn't? Please, Mr. Cobsale, don't give it to her. If you do I feel that some harm will come of it—to her, perhaps, as well as to you."

He laughed at her earnestness.

"You *are* a queer girl."

"I know I am," she said desperately. "I'm queer because I can't help knowing things other people don't. That's why I'm so afraid. . . . I beg you not to upset your brother over this. If you do, I've a feeling it may lead to—lead to—to—murder."

He stared at her, but he did not laugh. The next minute he said in quite a different voice:

"I'm sorry if I've upset you at all."

He probably thought she was mental. Perhaps she was. . . . She felt that in time she would be, if things went on happening like this. She must stop them somehow. She made an effort that sounded pathetic even to herself.

"Oh, won't you?" she asked. "Oh, won't you give that work-basket to me?"

He looked at her queerly and obstinately. No doubt he felt that he ought to humour her, but he was determined to give his present to no one but Joan.

"I'll give you something nicer," he said. "I'll give you a puppy."

She shook her head, while the tears brimmed up in her eyes. If she spoke they would fall.

"Our collie bitch is due for a litter next month," he continued, "and her pups are always fine. You shall have the pick."

She swallowed and managed to say:

"I don't think my mother would agree. Besides, that wouldn't help me—or you—or Joan. I asked you to give me the work-basket only because I'm sure that if you give it to her there will be trouble."

He still spoke soothingly.

"Oh, no, there won't be any trouble. I know Richard, and he'll be only too pleased if she gets a present he hasn't got to pay for."

"You don't believe that really. A minute ago you said . . . but you think I'm mad; you're trying to smooth me down. There's no need to. I'm being perfectly sensible and only saying what anyone else would say. You know yourself that if you give a present like that to Joan—or any sort of present—it'll lead to a quarrel."

She had at least convinced him of her sanity, for his manner changed the third time. It had begun as jaunty, had become careful and now was truculent.

"I don't care if it does," he answered roughly. "And what business is it of yours, anyway?"

"I'm fond of Joan."

"So am I—or I shouldn't have bought her a Christmas box."

"You've no right to be fond of her."

"Why not? I'm her brother-in-law, ain't I?"

"But——"

She broke off. Their voices had risen and people were turning in their seats. Perhaps it was lucky that, his attention thus called to her, Nigel Malpas came sliding down the 'bus, discovering the two empty seats, which he proclaimed so loudly that both his sisters decided to occupy them. The rest of the journey was lost in babble—a babble which still clamoured round her when they all left the 'bus together at Ember Lane.

Harry Cobsale did not speak another word except to wish her rather a churlish good night.

IV

JOAN COBSALE

WHEN Christmas came after a week of changing weather it was the usual green Christmas of the south. But though the unfrosted fields wore the damp colours that had darkened on them since they lost the brightness of summer pasture, and the water of ponds and dykes rippled under the stroke of a southerly breeze, the air was chillier than many a sharper air. Moisture hung globed in it, distilled from low, swagging clouds and exhaled from sodden clays, hazing and thickening objects only a few yards off, enlarging sounds, enriching scents, till the lanes seemed noisy with the song of last night's rain in the ditches and odorous with the rotting leaves in the woods.

Across the marsh Kent had almost disappeared; the windings of the road had been rubbed out on the hill, and Rushmonden was lost—smudged into the woods. Even the church steeple was nothing but a sound, a clamour of bells, swinging across the marsh to Loats Farm, where the rising fields caught it with queer, jangling echoes.

The bells wove themselves into Joan Cobsale's sleep and for a time kept her lingering in an innocent childish dream. She saw the Christmas tree in the parlour at Waxend, herself and her sisters in their party frocks holding hands in a gay circle round it, while her father on a step-ladder cut down the star from the topmost bough of the tree. The little picture shone for a moment, then wavered into confusion as alien figures appeared—Harry Cobsale and fat Daisy mocking her, Lucinda Light offering her a fairy doll, becoming herself a fairy doll with a star on her forehead; and Richard—Oh, where was Richard? She had lost Richard. Oh, where had he gone?

She woke, her arm groping for him across the bed. He was not there, and for a moment her waking was full of the blankness of her

dream. Even when she saw the clock and realized that he must have gone downstairs half an hour ago, she still felt anxious—as if his going from her side were not a natural thing that happened every morning, but some new calamity.

She sat up, fully awake at last, and the shadow left her. The room was full of hesitating light and the sound of bells. It was Christmas morning—the first since her marriage. She slid out of bed, shivering in the heavy, damp cold, yet not waiting to put on either slippers or dressing-gown before she ran to the window and looked out. At first she could see nothing—the panes of the little window were beaded with a damp which a hundred miles further north would have been frost and no colder. She wiped it away and saw a landscape of grey and white mists and green shadows—shadows which as she gazed revealed themselves as trees and hedges and strips of meadowland.

Out of doors it was the Christmas she was accustomed to—her fading, familiar bedroom at Waxend would have given her a view differing only in detail from what she saw now. But the indoor circumstances had changed. She missed the chattering of her sisters, as they all sat on the bed, snuggling together in the cold and untying their presents. The floor would soon be covered with the wrappings of thirty parcels, the arithmetic of six girls each giving a present to each of the others—pretty or funny trifles, to suit their purses. Their father's more imposing gifts would be awaiting them at breakfast time, and when all the pleasure and fun upstairs were exhausted they would go crowding and laughing down in search of more in the dining-room.

At Loats there were also six present givers, but the arithmetic worked out very differently. Joan felt a chill sharper than any in the room as she thought of the Christmas breakfast-table at Loats Farm, with its divisions maintained and its conversational camouflages exaggerated to cover their insult to the season of goodwill.

She felt a chill, and then immediately a hot prick of irritation. It really was silly to go on like this. For a time—yes. She could remember refusing to speak to Daphne for a whole day after she had been so mean about those cinema tickets. . . . But the Cobsales had been going

on like this for months, and as far as she could tell would go on like this for ever. Their quarrel had become a matter of tradition and family pride, and to ignore it by so much as wishing a Merry Christmas to anyone on the other side of the house would be as big a disloyalty to your own side as stealing their money. It really had come to that. If it hadn't, she told herself, she would have braved things to-day and wished Harry and Daisy and her mother-in-law the greetings of the season.

She began to dress, for by this time she felt cold right through. The mirror on her dressing-table was clouded with moisture, and as she wiped it she noticed a little parcel beside her hair-brush, which she had not seen before in the dim light. Opening it she found a plain white linen handkerchief with a large J embroidered in the corner.

There was no message, but she guessed that it was Richard's present. For a moment she felt a pang of disappointment—she had expected something better, something more in her father's style of giving. But immediately she remembered how far outside Richard's scope and experience were presents of any kind. He had hardly ever given her anything, sweet and devoted as he was. His tenderness did not express itself that way and no doubt he had a little surprised himself by giving her anything at all.

Anyway, she had her father's present to look forward to, as well as all her sisters' funny little gifts, and some hours of friendliness and laughter. She and Richard were going to spend the evening at Waxend, and the thought seemed to break like sunshine into the mists of the day. Her only trouble was that she had all the main business of Christmas to live through first at Loats—breakfast, at which all the Cobsales ought to be opening their presents from one another, instead of emphasizing their division with limited exchanges; dinner, which she ought to be helping her mother-in-law prepare, instead of leaving her to Daisy's waddling ministrations.

If it wasn't for Richard she could never endure all this . . . she picked up the handkerchief. She would go down and find him and thank him for it, and give him the hair-brushes she had bought him—he had asked for something useful. She would also give Madge her

box of silk-covered coat-hangers. She had decided some time ago to bestow these privately, so as not to emphasize the presents she must in loyalty withhold from the other three.

Richard was in the yard, just coming out of the cake-house. There was nobody about, and she ran towards him, but checked as she thought of all the windows of Loats staring at her like unfriendly eyes. Suppose Mrs. Cobsale, or Daisy or Harry were watching her from behind a curtain . . . Richard evidently had no such thought, for he hugged her closely, smelling good of linseed oil.

"Hullo, little creature."

"Hullo and a Merry Christmas."

He laughed.

"I was near forgetting all about that."

"Well, I wasn't—here's your Christmas present," and she put the parcel in his hand.

He remembered something then.

"Did you see what I left for you?"

"Yes, the handkerchief. Thank you so much."

"You liked it, did you?"

"Of course I did. Do you like your brushes?"

He looked grave.

"You shouldn't ought to have spent such a lot of money on me."

"I wanted to give you something nice——" she flashed up a smile at him, "—because I love you so."

"You dear little thing . . ."

Once more he braved the stare of the house and its hidden people, and kissed her smile as it lingered on her mouth.

"Darling Dick."

For a moment she stood leaning against him, in the crook of his arm, loving him because she was alone with him, happy because they were together off the battlefield. If only they could always be like this. . . . If only they could go away—or the others would go . . . or even if they could all live peacefully and amiably together like the family at Waxend. . . . A throb of homesickness disquieted her and made her move restlessly. He looked down.

"Everything all right, pet? Feeling happy, ain't you?"

"Oh, yes—quite." Then she added suddenly: "But I'd be happier if we were all friends."

"Who were all friends?"

"All the family—you and me and your mother and Harry and the girls."

She felt him stiffen immediately.

"That can never be."

"Never?"

"No, not unless Harry and his mother change, and act different; and they never will."

"I think it's horrible all living together and hating one another like this."

"It isn't my fault. Harry can clear out any day he pleases."

"I don't see that he can—without any capital of his own. And, anyway, why should he? He's the eldest son."

Richard looked hurt and astonished.

"You sound as if you were taking his part."

"Well, I'm not. But I can't see why you and he can't get together and compromise a bit. This not speaking to one another is childish and I'm sick of it. I hate it. It makes me miserable."

Anger and misery suddenly filled her eyes with tears. Richard looked distressed. He said uneasily:

"I told you how it would be before you came."

"I know you did. But I didn't really understand, or know what it would be like. I don't see how I could, with my own family getting on so well together. It's dreadful to see brothers and sisters hating one another—especially at Christmas time."

He said:

"I don't see what Christmas has got to do with it."

She said:

"I'm going indoors. It's cold."

There was no one in the kitchen. The fire burned brightly and the table was laid, but neither the tea was made nor the bacon cooked,

nor were there any signs of activity in the scullery next door. She was going out of the room again, for she did not want to be waiting there while the family uncomfortably assembled; but just as she turned she noticed a large parcel on the table beside her plate.

She looked again. Yes, it must be for her, because it stood on her plate and her serviette in its yellow ring had been laid on the top of it, as if to prevent any mistake. Who could be giving her such a large present? She had already encountered Madge and received her powder compact. The Waxend family were keeping their gifts till the evening.

Curious and a little excited, she examined the parcel more closely. There was no writing on it at all. She fumbled it, but could discover nothing except a box. What could it be? More important—whom could it be from? Was it possible that. . . . Then suddenly she thought of Lucinda Light. Perhaps she was the giver. She might have run down early—or more probably she had given it to Madge last night.

Well, she had better open it and find out. She cut the string and found as she expected a cardboard box. She opened it and gave a little gasp. Inside was an enormous work-basket exquisitely lined with pale blue satin, and fitted up completely with scissors, thimble, needle-case, pin-cushion, skeins of coloured silk and at least a dozen reels and bobbins. She had never seen such a fine one, and she fingered the contents with little gasps of delight. If Lucinda had given it to her, she was in an awkward position, as she herself had given her nothing, not even a Christmas card. But she did not think for a moment that Lucinda could have afforded such an expensive present—she never seemed to have much pocket-money. There was no card or message. She searched, but could find nothing.

“Merry Christmas, Joan.”

She started violently and looked up. Harry Cobsale was leaning against the door-post, and had, she felt, been leaning there for some time. She blushed as red as holly, but did not speak.

“Like it?” he said easily.

Without thinking, she nodded.

“I’m glad.”

"Oh . . . did you——" Her hand flew to her mouth.

"Yes, Missus, I did. I didn't see why you should go about with that silly little bag any longer, and as I knew no one else would buy you a nice one I bought it myself."

He evidently saw by her stiffening that he did not please her, for the next moment he dropped his swagger and said in quite a different voice:

"Another thing I didn't see was why you and me shouldn't be friends just for once on Christmas Day."

He had touched her on a sensitive spot, and before she knew what she was saying she had said: "I wish we could."

"Well, we can, can't we? Who's to stop us?"

He came a few steps into the room and stood beside her, looking down at the open basket on the table.

"Have you looked inside all those pockets?"

She was unable to resist such a changed atmosphere. Her fingers searched the little blue satin pockets and discovered an emery board, a nail file, a card of lace-pins and other small treasures. Harry chuckled as she drew out each one.

"D'you remember the time you dropped your thimble and we knocked our heads together?"

She nodded.

"You near cracked my skull."

She said nothing, for loyalty to Richard still bound her on the pale of friendliness.

"Why don't you answer me?"

"Oh, you know why. I can't. I mustn't."

"Yes, you can, to-day. You said you wished you and me could be friends for Christmas Day."

"I wish we all could."

He looked at her for a moment, and smiled in a way that made him attractively like Richard.

"If I speak to the others, will you speak to me?"

She hesitated. Was there really a chance of ending this horrible and ridiculous situation? If there was she ought to take it. She did not

believe that if the barriers could be broken down for one day that they would ever be set up again.

"Very well—if you'll speak to the others I'll speak to you."

"Right—it's a bargain."

He held out his hand. She had a vision of Richard's hurt and angry face: "You're taking his part". . . . She hesitated. But the next minute she seemed to see an amiable family of Cobsales chattering round the Christmas breakfast-table, in the centre of which her beautiful work-basket glittered like the fairy doll on the Christmas tree. . . . She put her hand in his.

He said:

"I always knew you and me could be friends. I wish we could have settled it earlier, and then maybe I shouldn't have done some of the stupid things I've done. D'you really like your work-basket?"

"Of course I do. I think it's lovely."

"You won't go dropping your thimble out of this."

She laughed, her spirits soaring. Then suddenly she cried:

"Look here, Harry—we'll have to be very careful with Richard or he won't let me keep it."

"He can't take it away. It's yours."

"I know, but—— Oh, Harry, do promise me you'll be tactful and not upset him. He'll want handling with care, you know—more than the others."

Harry roared with laughter.

"But you promise me."

"I promise you, Missus."

Already there seemed an alliance between them.

She went back to the work-basket. Now that it had become the pledge of reconciliation its blue satin seemed to shine with a new light. She and Harry turned over the contents again together, his great fingers fumbling beside hers. Every now and then he asked her: "What's this for?" or "What do you think of this?" For five minutes enmity and mistrust were dead, and the kitchen of Loats was warm with friendliness and goodwill.

Then Madge came into the room.

"Hullo," she said, "breakfast not ready?"

"Merry Christmas, Madge," said Harry.

Madge ignored him.

"I was wondering," she said to Joan, "if I'd go to church this morning. I think it would be nice on Christmas Day. Like to come with me?"

"Yes," said Joan, "I would."

"And so would I," said Harry.

Madge cast him a withering look, and Joan came with some trepidation to his rescue.

"I think it would be nice if he came too. He and I have been making up our minds . . . I mean, I think it's miserable for us all to be hating one another on Christmas Day, so I thought that—that—just for the one day we might—we could try—we might speak to each other."

Madge looked at her in horror and indignation.

"You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because it would be terrible—after all the things he's said about Richard. I don't see how you can."

"I think," drawled Harry, "that it would be ever so nice for us all to go to church together."

Joan looked at him sharply. He was mocking again, and she began to wonder just how serious he was in his Christmas undertaking. Her eye travelled doubtfully towards the work-basket, which Madge, following her gaze, caught sight of for the first time.

"Whatever's that?"

"Harry's Christmas present to me."

Madge gaped at her.

"Joan Cobsale, you must be mad."

As the preposterous situation urged itself upon her, Joan recovered some of her lost confidence.

"Don't be silly, Madge. It's really too absurd for a lot of grown-up people to go on like this. We're no better than kids. Harry's got shut of that nonsense, so I'm going to play up to him and talk to him and to all the rest of the family."

Madge suddenly became lofty.

"Well all I can say is that I fail to understand you. I should have thought that as Richard's wife . . . that's partly it, I suppose; you come from outside and don't belong to us, so you can't realize . . . well, anyway, if you speak to Harry I shan't speak to you—that's all."

And she stalked out of the room.

This was a bad start, and Joan looked miserably at Harry. He was grinning.

"Don't you worry about her, Missus. She'll come round."

"I don't believe she will."

"It'll make no difference. You can talk to Ma and Daisy instead. I'll see that they treat you proper. And you've got Richard to talk to anyway, so there'll be only one in the house who doesn't speak to you instead of three."

Joan sighed doubtfully and Harry strode to the door.

"I want my breakfast," he said. "Where've Ma and Daisy got to? I'll fetch 'em here. Ma!" he called down the passage. "Hi! Joan and I want our breakfast before dinner-time."

A distant answer came from the chicken yard, and after an interval the two women appeared.

"You needn't get wild," said Daisy. "Christmas Day's the same as Sunday and breakfast's at nine. And anyway something's scared my chicken—they've thrown themselves about so bad they've sent a whole battery down. Ma and I've been picking them off the floor."

"Never mind," said Harry, "make you thinner. And aren't neither of you going to wish me a Merry Christmas?"

"Give us a Christmas present first," said Daisy. "What's that?"

She was looking hopefully at the work-basket on the table.

"That," said Harry, "is my Christmas present to Joan."

The mother and daughter stared at each other and then at his grinning face. Joan thought that she had better take the explanation on herself.

"Harry and I," she said rather nervously, "both feel that it's wrong not to speak to each other on Christmas Day; but I said I wouldn't

“I want to be friends with—with all of you.”

Mrs. Cobsale and Daisy were dumb.

“Come on, Ma,” said Harry, “wish Joan a Merry Christmas.”

Both women glared at him.

“You and your Merry Christmas!” cried Daisy, finding a wrathful tongue. “What difference does it make? We didn’t talk to each other last Christmas, did we? and yet we enjoyed ourselves all right. But this Christmas there’s a girl in the house with what you think’s a pretty face, so you’ve got to make up to her, even though she is your brother’s wife.”

“Oh! . . .” cried Joan.

“You dirty bitch,” said Harry.

Daisy advanced on him with her neck thrust out like an angry goose.

“All I can say, Harry Cobsale, is that it’s just like you to spend your money on a stranger and leave your mother and sister without so much as a Christmas card. Here am I, your sister, with nothing to keep my sewing in but a trug, and you go and buy a beautiful satin basket as big as a cradle for a girl Richard’s brought in to spy on us.”

“At that’s right!” chimed in Mrs. Cobsale. “I’ve fought your battles for a twelvemonth, but it don’t follow that I approve of your ways. You should ought to treat your mother and sister better. The only thing at Loats that pays is the chicken, but you don’t even leave me and Daisy with enough to buy us decent clothing. Look at me on Christmas Day, all patched under the arms! You’re as bad as Richard for taking our money off us; but at least he spends it on the farm, while you spend it on trollops and drink.”

“Now,” said Harry in an ugly voice, “you be careful with your trollops.”

The plan for the pacification of Loats did not seem to be going very well. All it had done so far was to split up the combatants into new, more painful antagonisms. Joan felt that Madge would never speak to her again, and here were Mrs. Cobsale and Daisy both hoarse with abusing Harry.

"Oh, please don't think——" she began, but broke off as she saw Richard come into the room, followed by Madge.

For a moment he stood staring silently—at them and at the guilty object on the table. Then he said in a queer, throttled voice:

"Madge tells me Harry's been upsetting Joan."

"Madge is a liar," said Harry. "All I've done has been to give the poor little kid a Christmas box."

A dark flush crept up Richard's face, from his throat to his forehead. He nodded towards the work-basket.

"Is *that* it?"

"Yes, indeed," cried Mrs. Cobsale, whom indignation seemed to have torn loose from her normal allegiances, "that's it and cost every penny of a pound."

Joan suddenly felt desperate. She must end this nightmare scene which she—or was it Harry?—had provoked. She ran across to Richard and flung her arms round his stiff, angry body.

"Dick," she cried, "listen to me. It's only because I didn't want us to quarrel on Christmas Day. I've told you how unhappy it makes me. So I promised Harry that if he'd speak to the rest of the family I would too."

She tried to drag down his face to hers, but his neck would not bend.

"Is that why you asked me if we might all speak to one another on Christmas Day? You knew that Harry had bought you this?"

"No, no, I didn't? I swear it wasn't that. I hadn't the smallest notion."

He pushed her from him—violently, so that she spun round and bruised her hip against the corner of the table.

Harry sprang forward.

"You brute!" he cried. "You dirty brute!"

"Keep off," cried Richard, "and mind your own business."

"I shan't. Not if by that you mean that I'm to stand by and watch you beat up Joan. She has a miserable time here among us all, and then just because I'm sorry for her and try to make things easier, you turn nasty—to her as well as to me. I tell you——"

"Harry! Harry! Don't!" sobbed Joan.

"Hold your tongue" cried Richard, who was shaking with rage. "You're not to speak to him. All this has got to stop. Go and put on your things and I'll take you over to Waxend at once. And you—as for you——" he clenched his fists and took a few steps towards Harry, "you'd better go down to Chequers and see what the police are doing about that brat of yours they've dug up."

Joan screamed as Harry smacked his face.

In a moment they had hold of each other and were struggling together. They staggered about the room panting like oxen; soon they had crashed into the breakfast-table, sending it over with all its cups and saucers and plates and spoons, and also with a shower of skeins and bobbins, scissors and pins, as the work-basket went too. Then Harry caught his foot in the trailing table-cloth and fell down, with Richard on the top of him.

Richard was on his feet at once, and immediately Joan and Madge seized his arms, while Harry rose more slowly, both helped and held by Daisy and Mrs. Cobsale. The two sides of the family faced each other again in their old enmities. Richard's hair was over his forehead and his collar had been torn off, but Harry's nose was bleeding and he looked the worse of the two. He looked so dreadful, with the blood pouring down his face and the hate burning in his eyes, that Joan bowed her head against Richard's arm.

"Lemme go!" he cried. "Lemme get at him. I've begun on him and I mean to finish him."

But his mother and sister hung on his arms, and as they were both great, heavy women, he could not shake them off.

"Come along with us," said Mrs. Cobsale. "Come along into the scullery and put your head over the sink."

He must have been a little dazed, for he let them lead him away.

Richard turned to Joan, who was still hiding her face against his arm.

"Put on your hat and coat," he said, "and we'll go and have our breakfast at Waxend. Madge, if you like you can come too."

"I think I'd better stay and clear up this mess," said Madge, picking a needle-case out of a pool of tea.

JESS MARLOTT

ON the hill above Loats, in the field where the mud clotted winter by winter, Honeypools was living up to the origins of its name. There was one place where Jess Marlott had splashed in above the top of her gum-boot. Even in Suffolk they had never had such land, and of course for chicken it was dreadful—the floors of the houses were rotting and the lining was coming apart from the walls.

She had lived too long in the South to expect snow at Christmas, but to-day she found herself longing for the snow. As a child she had spent most of her Christmases in Northumberland, and her memory was full of bleak, white spreads, blackened suddenly here and there by fir-woods and slopes which the wind had stripped, with the dark knob of the Cheviot rising above it all against the moving sky. She remembered how sometimes the clouds would part, revealing a blue so pale as to be light rather than colour, with a long, pale sunbeam hanging through the rift and making the world suddenly seem larger—wider?—higher? . . . how could she describe the change wrought by that sudden stab of sun?

It was strange, she thought, how often her mind travelled back to childhood in these days. She had not thought that fifty years were enough to make a ring. Perhaps it was death rather than old age which held the gift of a golden ring . . . of a shining mirror. . . . She no longer saw a ring, but a mirror—a pool of deep water into which she gazed, discerning in it reflections among which she must one day, almost happily, drown.

She was not afraid of death, though she did not wish for it and would gladly have escaped it if she could. But she knew now that she was not to escape. The doctor at Woodhorn had told her on her

second visit much that he had not told her on the first. She had left things too long—it was not really her fault; she could not have known, and he would not let her think that much could have been done even if she had gone to him a year ago. Postponement of the inevitable, alleviation of what must be endured . . . she did not know if she really regretted either of those two doubtful benefits she might have won.

She was not afraid—except of dying or having to go away before she had made all her preparations on behalf of Greg. The actual pains of dissolution were not likely to be worse than the pains which now visited her every day; and sometimes she was so acutely, brokenly tired that she felt she could pay anything for rest. Of death itself she scarcely knew enough to be afraid. It too was linked with childhood's memories—she had lost her mother in her fourteenth year. When she died she supposed she would be with her mother again, and her father too, though now he was only a shadow moving across her mind. She did not really want to be with either of them very much.

The only question that lived for her was: would she still be able to do anything for Greg when she was gone? Help him in any way? Watch over him? . . . People said . . . and she had read. . . . But she could not feel sure or even very hopeful. That was why she was struggling so hard to get everything in order before she went.

Her list of things that must be done seemed to grow longer. No sooner had she ticked off one item than another arose. She thought she had persuaded Greg to join a co-operative society for marketing his eggs—now that he no longer visited Brenda it was, of course, no longer urgent that he should go off on those long rounds by himself—and she had arranged with the building society for a weekly payment of arrears which she hoped would get things clear before the end. But she did not entertain much hope of living to see a new brooder-house, or even the old one adequately repaired; and as for Greg's clothes—every spare moment was full of her patching and darning. If only they could afford a new outfit for him . . . but as they could not, she was determined not to leave him in rags.

Sometimes, however, she thought that she would gladly die with nothing on her list crossed out if only one unwritten item could be properly cancelled—the most urgent necessity of all. If she had written it down it would have read: “Gieg must know about Brenda.” He must know that his wife’s death would not give him the freedom of his heart. He must know that Brenda Light did not care for him, would never care, had never cared . . . that her letter had been a lie, told in order to get rid of him, that the best thing he could do would be to leave the district and that all his wife’s efforts to clear Honeypools of debt and disorder had been made with this end in view.

He must know all this while she was still there to comfort him. She could not bear to think of his living through that awful moment of disillusion without her tenderness. Also if he knew about Brenda before he knew about Jess the blow would not be quite so overwhelming. It was the thought of him suddenly discovering his freedom, wiping away his tears—for, even though he did not love her as he loved Brenda, her death would grieve him excessively—and going off to the Old Parsonage with that wild hope she knew so well soaring in his foolish heart, only to have his heart broken and his hope destroyed . . .

She never could think so far as this without hating Brenda. She did not want to hate her, because she was going to die and the clearest religious precept in her mind was the wickedness of hate. “Let not the sun go down upon your wrath”—and here was sunset indeed. But for this consideration she would have hated Brenda more bitterly than in the early days when she had seen her as her rival, trying to snatch her husband from her, triumphing over her in her superior powers.

Of course she must not blame her entirely for the present situation. It was she, Jess, who had at least prepared the way for it by that second appeal she had made. If only she had let things alone and had stood by, doing what she could to help Greg endure his loss. . . . Instead of which she had rushed off to beg Mrs. Light to undo everything that she had done, to accept him again and make him happy. She had been like a mother with a spoilt child. It would have been

better to let him suffer then, so that now she would not have to think of him suffering uncomforted when she was gone.

But she had never thought Brenda would be so treacherous. She had known her to be kind, so she had believed her to be honourable. She had never thought that anyone could write such words untruthfully—blaspheming the high name of love. That letter . . . but she must not think of it or her wrath would be red as sunset. . . . Oh, if only she had not interfered! But it was too late for regrets, and they wasted time. It was urgent that she should think of some way of enlightening Greg and undoing as far as possible the harm that she and Brenda had done between them (let us be honest and see things clearly before the sun goes down).

How was she to tell him the truth? There was only one form in which he would believe it and that was in its fullness, which could never be revealed. He must never know of the conspiracy between his wife and the woman he loved. Whatever happened he must not hear of that. If he knew that Jess and Brenda had discussed him together, talked him over, asked and given advice about him . . . but it was too dreadful to think of. At all costs it must not be. And yet without some such disclosure she could do nothing useful. She did not think for a moment that he would take her unsupported word for Brenda's indifference. What was she to do?

This was just the sort of difficulty in which, earlier she would have turned to Brenda herself for advice. But she would not do so now—she no longer trusted her. She would have to tease the problem out for herself—rely on her own poor harried wits—or else hope for some lucky turn of events . . . but she was not so hopeful by nature as Greg.

She had not yet told him about the doctors' verdict. He knew that she was ill and had to take care, but she had not gone further in revelation. There was no immediate hurry, and to tell him that much might precipitate the need for telling him the rest. She could not bring that emergency upon herself until she was better prepared for it.

On Christmas morning he rose as usual, creeping stealthily from

the bed so as not to wake her (who had been awake four hours), and going next door into the kitchen to make her an early cup of tea. He had done this ever since they were married, and as she heard him go she prayed that he might be able to keep on doing it till the end, that her last few cups of tea would not be handed her by aproned strangers. . . . It seemed a small thing to pray for on Christmas morning, but she wanted it very much.

As soon as she heard him getting busy with the kettle and the stove she slipped out of bed, and fetched his Christmas present from the chest of drawers. It was a silk handkerchief with a tie to match, and had cost her half a guinea. She had wanted to give him something special for their last Christmas, but it must not look too expensive or he might embarrass her with his comments. Their Christmas presents to each other had always been secret and personal—no arranged compromises with household needs, but something chosen each for the other as a delight and a surprise. She wondered ruefully what he had bought for her this year.

The room was as cold as only five-inch walls and a floor laid stark on the clay could make it. Jess shivered; her dressing-gown was thin. Sometimes on these cold mornings she had worn her old fur coat in bed while she drank her tea. But on Christmas Day she would not affront Greg's eyes with such a sight or his mind with such a contrast. She would put on her best velvet jacket, a beaded affair trimmed with transfigured rabbit, and described as a "bridge coat" when bought some eight or nine years ago. She kept it in reserve for chilly indoor festivities, of which there had been none since her coming to Woodhorn, so it had hung neglected in the wardrobe till this morning.

Greg's best suit hung beside it, and as she took her jacket off its peg she noticed that something was bulging the pocket of his. She clicked her tongue—he was always spoiling his clothes by stuffing things into the pockets; it was not till she had taken out the offending object that she realized she had unwittingly broken into the secret of what must be his Christmas present to her. In her hand was one of the gaily decorated boxes with which the Potcommon Co-operative Stores gave glamour to its Christmas stock. She hastily put it back, feeling as if

she had exposed a child's secret. The next minute she was in bed again, sitting up eager and grateful, to give and to receive.

"Merry Christmas, darling," she said as he came in.

"Merry Christmas."

He stooped and kissed her as he gave her the tea; then he fumbled in his pocket and drew out a little parcel, which he put in her hands.

"Here's from me with love to you."

For a moment she was too surprised to open it. "But I thought . . ." mercifully she did not say it aloud, for her mind, working quickly, immediately supplied the explanation. Her heart felt as cold as her hands as she unwrapped the little parcel and displayed a tiny bottle of eau-de-Cologne.

"Thank you so much, my precious."

"I thought that would be good for your headaches."

She did not have headaches, but she gathered that was what he had made of her recurrent attacks of exhaustion and pain. She was grateful to him for even so much thought in his distraction, and thanked him effusively—her mind, however, wandering so far that it was not till she had done thanking him and had poured the first few drops from the bottle on her handkerchief that she realized she had forgotten to give him her own present. As she took it from under the pillow and handed it to him she saw that he had forgotten too.

They lived through the morning lost to each other in their separate distractions. Eating their breakfast together, working together with the chicken, they were two planets moving remote on their different orbits round the same sun. She could think of nothing but his Christmas present to Brenda Light, and she knew that he was thinking of the same thing; but, judging by his expression, his thoughts were very unlike hers.

He sometimes had a queer exalted look in his eyes, and she was confirmed in the suspicion that had been in her mind almost from the start—that he meant to go to see Brenda some time to-day. He meant personally to give her whatever it was. . . . He hadn't enough tact to send his gift anonymously nor enough sense to use the post.

He was going to hurl himself straight into her jaws. . . . Very well—let him. This time she would not interfere.

For she realized that his folly might bring about the very thing she had prayed for. Brenda would in all probability show him in no uncertain way the vainness of his belief in her love. Jess imagined that she would reject his gift and send him packing. Almost certainly she would not attempt to live up to her letter. She had been capable of writing a lie, but surely it was a lie too monstrous to be lived. At the easiest Greg would be let down with a disappointment—sent away with a few kind words (she would not think of a few kind kisses) that would show even his foolish heart that there had been an exaggeration, if not a mistake. He would come back with his tail between his legs, if not actually beaten, and then she would be free to ask questions, to make discoveries, and having made discoveries to offer comfort, and having comforted to hearten and prepare. Perhaps Brenda would be a better—because unwitting—friend to her now than she had been on past occasions.

Having resigned—or rather, reconciled—herself to the immediate future, Jess spent the morning in a certain tranquillity. She was indoors most of the time, preparing their Christmas dinner, which consisted of roast fowl and a very small plum pudding—bought ready-made at Farable's and just enough for two people.

She took advantage of Greg's absence in the chicken field to yield to a temptation which had been pressing her all the morning, and which she had, after some argument with herself, decided need not be resisted. She wanted desperately to know what sort of present he was giving to Brenda Light.

The desire was partly, she acknowledged, due to sheer feminine curiosity. What had Greg thought worthy of his beloved? To what extravagance had he run for her sake? There was anxiety, too. He was not a good present-giver; it often took a lot of love to make his offerings acceptable. She was desperately afraid lest his gift should disparage him. Now that her worshipping admiration of Mrs. Light had gone the way of earlier cults—suddenly destroyed at that last meeting, when her great kindness had served only to set off her great

falseness—she was ranged almost defiantly against her on the side of her man.

It was in the spirit of hope mixed with anxiety that she finally opened the gaudy little box. Perhaps some kindly saleswoman had counselled his inexperience and persuaded him to a gift that at least would not add to his offences. She was reassured to find a quite presentable marcasite clip, the price of which she calculated at from twelve and sixpence to fifteen shillings. This, though certainly more than he could afford, was very much less than in his madness he might have spent; nor had he prepared incrimination for himself with any amorous message. So the prevailing result of her examination was relief.

She had already decided when the presentation would be made. He would go out while she was "resting" in the afternoon—lately she had started the habit of lying down for an hour or so after dinner, a time when pain was most liable to spring on her. Exactly what device he might use to dress himself in his best without her knowledge was still a matter of speculation.

Now that she had accepted this day as the day of his enlightenment, she felt curiously detached from his setting forth. All her thoughts, plans and energies were concentrated on his coming home. She was ready either for despair or for deceit—she realized that she might have to tear the last rags of concealment off him before she could give him all that she had to give. But of one thing she was certain: sometime this evening she would have him back again, broken, but hers. She was not glad. The thought gave her no sense of triumph or release, as it might have done if she were not going to leave him so soon. Any hope of cherishing and comforting him again as she had cherished and comforted him on that night of first disclosure three months ago was shadowed by the thought that her comfort was transitory, her possession only a lease. . . . Unless in death she could hold him still . . . with tears on her cheeks she fumbled with a prayer.

But at least what she had prayed for most was happening. Brenda would open his eyes before hers were shut for ever. The thought made her cheerful, and she sat down with him to their Christmas dinner in spirits that were almost high. She met a queer sort of

response in him—a response that would have perplexed her had she not guessed its sources. His eyes were sparkling, he talked and laughed, and though his thoughts were often astray she could see that they were astray in pleasant places.

After dinner he said gaily:

“Darling, I’m going to light the sitting-room fire. You’re going to have a nice rest in there, as it’s Christmas Day.”

BRENDA LIGHT

BRENDA LIGHT spent the morning of Christmas Day restlessly. It was the second of the era that dated her now. Last Christmas she and Lucinda had been lost to each other in separate sorrowings for the same event. Their eyes had never met, nor their hearts.

Had things changed much this year? She had a queer feeling that history was repeating itself to-day. Lucinda ran about the house, sang in a high, nervous voice, ran across to the Rectory and went to church with the Malpas children, came back and ran about singing again. What was she really doing? Her mother did not know. She felt as far from her as she had felt a year ago. Their eyes often met, but in Lucinda's was a blank, unrecognizing look.

As for herself, life did not seem so very different, in spite of external changes. Last Christmas she had been in London, now she was in Woodhorn; last Christmas Michael had just gone abroad, this year he was less than half a mile away. But, town or country, far or near, her mind ached with the thought of him just the same, and she realized now that his nearness and his farness were both part of the same determination. Because he was determined that Nicky should divide them no more in death than he had in life, he at first had accepted her dismissal and gone away, then flouted it and come back. Both his going and his coming were an assault on what he called her sentimentality, her morbidity, her irrationality. He saw these horrible things in her, and under the battering of his will she was beginning to see them too—to see a mawkish Victorian conscience living in herself, ugly and incongruous as an aspidistra in a modern room.

Yet deep in her heart, something which was herself in spite of many denials, told her that in resisting Michael she was fighting for more

than a piece of moral lumber. The house, the Old Parsonage, and all that it stood for seemed ranged with her against his will. It had failed her as a refuge—or had she failed it?—but it still seemed to embody what was good and steady and true . . . sentimental? morbid? irrational?

She could not tell. She could only turn these things over in her mind, first inclining to one side, then to the other. It might well be that in following this strange urge of her nature towards expiation she was simply being sentimental and morbid, yielding to a childish sense of guilt. She had felt no guilt while Nicky was alive, though she had betrayed him more completely than she could ever betray him now. Her conscience might be diseased, a perverse survival from an unhappy and disordered childhood. . . . She must deal strictly with herself and end the conflict which comes of harbouring the incongruous. Let's escape and be all of a piece—let's be happy and tough and intelligent in all things as we are in some. Or shall we yield to the other side and be sentimental and morbid and irrational altogether?—good and steady and true? . . .

So the conflict remained.

Barney was coming to lunch. She no longer tried to put a check on his visits. Not only had her resolution weakened against him, but he now seemed definitely in league with Mrs. Shafto, who encouraged him by the negative process of refusing to object when he came to meals. Certainly he must have tipped her well this Christmas, for she was in a fine good humour and insisted on laying the luncheon table herself, refusing any help from a mistress accustomed to serve.

"You take it easy, ma'am, this morning. You'll be tired before you're home to-night, and I'll have all the evening to get myself straight in."

That night they were to dine and dance at the Grand Hotel in Marlingate—she, Barney, Lucinda and Humfrey Malpas who had been invited to make a fourth. It had all the air of an innocent occasion, but Brenda dreaded it, as she dreaded (while she adored) every contact with Michael now. They never happened without giving her some unpleasant glimpse of her own weakness. When he was away from

her she could find comfort in the thought that very soon—in less than a month—he would have sailed for New York. But when she was with him she could no longer see that journey as her deliverance. It appeared rather as a challenge. It marked a period—the time she still had left for decision. Before he went she would have to make up her mind one way or the other. Reluctantly she had to confess that she was still drifting.

After all, her attempt to remake her life had so far been a failure—both practically and psychologically. Practically speaking, she had not found the refuge she had expected at Woodhorn; nor had she had any sensation of starting a new life there. Rather she had been bored by a futile consciousness of marking time. She had been stifled and flustered by domestic worries, exasperated by her solitary attempt at diversion.

Nor on the psychological side of things had there been any better achievements. Again she had a sense of futility—nothing made of herself. Her sorrow for Nicky, her desire for reparation, had done nothing creative in her. How had she failed? And was the failure her own or a part of the idea that had urged her? Had she been too small for a big thing or was the thing itself no better than an aspidistra in a pot?

She did not know; she knew only that some instinct still drove her to refuse the gift of what she once had stolen. If she married Barney, could they live as honestly and happily together as they had lived when she was married to Nicholas? Or would she feel constantly the guilt that she had never felt then? He would, she knew, dismiss such questions as ridiculous—as mere scruples of her aspidistra conscience. He did not understand her—and perhaps she was not worth understanding. Her heart hardened, first against him, then against herself.

Just because, perhaps, her heart was hard, lunch passed off gaily. They all three laughed and talked all the time, but she felt that only Barney's gaiety was real. Lucinda's was as ghostly as her own. Well, never mind; there, at least, was one bad occasion over, swept away with the plates. And now Michael was asking Lucinda to go for a

walk with him, to help him shake down Mrs. Shafto's Christmas pudding.

"I won't ask you to come," he said to Brenda. "I know you hate walking."

And Lucinda said with a high-pitched laugh:

"Mummy never walks a yard."

Brenda had half expected her to decline the walk; but she did not. She agreed in her polite, old-fashioned way—more like a courteous old gentleman than a young modern girl—and they set out, leaving Brenda to deal with Mrs. Shafto's pudding more indolently. She lay back on the sofa and swung up her feet; it was wonderful and lucky that she remained slim without taking any exercise. She would read a novel and go to sleep—she had eaten enough to dull the restless activity of her mind, and she looked forward to half an hour's oblivion.

Sleep fell on her as easily as rain and its tranquillity washed away the lines on her face and filled in the contours. Her face lost its ravaged look and became the face of a sleeping girl, almost of a sleeping child. To Greg Marlott at the window it was the face of a beautiful, sleeping Princess, the Sleeping Beauty herself. He longed to find himself inside that room, standing beside her couch like the Prince of the Sleeping Wood, listening to her breath, stooping to wake her with a kiss.

To sleep—perchance to dream . . . Hamlet's rub was also Brenda's. If Greg Marlott had stayed at the window, he would have seen her face change, as dark wings touched it—strange birds sinking on her mind through the tranquil rain of sleep. Or perhaps if he had stayed at the window she would not have dreamed at all. Perhaps his opening of the door disturbed her, or his footsteps in the hall.

In the half-minute of his entry she had lived a whole life—not her own, but not unlike it. She had seen herself arriving at the Parsonage, gazing at the apple-blossom which had bloomed so long in the glass case of her memory. In her dream it had changed, from flowers to fire; it rose against the ceiling in a delicate smoke, lit by pink flames. "Oh," she said, "the house is burning." Mrs. Derry's voice answered: "Nonsense, dear; you go to sleep." She had snuggled down, but she

knew the house was burning. Would it be all right if she waited till morning and then walked out in the ordinary way? Or should she escape now, showing herself to them all? Her mother came into the room and began doing her hair at the glass, lifting her elbows to the familiar angle Brenda had watched from her bed so many mornings. Then Nicky came in and stooped to kiss her. She said: "You shouldn't kiss me—you should kiss mother." She was shocked because he had wanted to kiss her; she felt guilty, as if she had committed a sin. She said: "I'm waiting for someone—you must go out before he comes," and he said, as he had said so often: "Certainly, my dear."

The dream seemed to shake like a broken film at the flicks. She was going through long halls, searching for someone she did not know. When she found him he was with Lucinda and said: "I'd rather have her than you. She's so polite." She had answered indignantly: "What's the good of my coming here for a refuge if the house is burning? When those people sold me the house they must have known it was on fire." The unknown person answered: "Not at all, my sweet; that's just your Victorian conscience." Then she pointed to great flames coming through the floor. "Doesn't that convince you? If it doesn't, nothing will. But you're so obstinate—so damn sure of yourself." . . . She was full of anger and hatred; her breast seemed to burn with the house. And then suddenly she sat up—wide awake, staring at Greg Marlott.

For a moment she scarcely knew what she felt about him. He stood by the couch, looking down at her, stooping towards her a little. Then he smiled rather foolishly and drew back.

"Please forgive me," he said, "but you looked so beautiful while you were asleep."

Her mind was still full of anger from the dream, but as she looked at him it passed into a waking consternation. Here was Greg Marlott and how was she to get rid of him? The thought of his departure came before any question as to his arrival. Her first confused idea was that Mrs. Shafto must have let him in.

"You looked so beautiful," he babbled on, "that I couldn't help

thinking of the Princess in the fairy tale, and felt that perhaps you—you wouldn't be very angry if I woke you with a kiss."

"Of all the infernal cheek!"

She was fully awake now, though her wits still lagged behind her indignation. Had he actually kissed her? She could not tell and she would not ask him.

He said:

"If you knew the number of times I've stood outside this house and watched you through the window—when it was dark and you couldn't see me. . . . Then as to-day was Christmas Day I felt that I could just this once break our pact and come close to you again. Oh, my beautiful Brenda——"

She interrupted him.

"Please don't talk like that. You know I don't want to see you or speak to you. I've told you so as clearly as I could, and you've no right to force yourself upon me."

She was speaking plainly from her heart. She knew as she spoke that there were no longer any possibilities in him, even as a flirtation. She had not realized it before, but now she saw that Michael had wiped him out of her mind, and that even if she had not promised his wife to have nothing more to do with him she would have had to send him away.

He looked hang-dog for a moment.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, "I hadn't meant to come in like this. It was only the sight of you sleeping . . ."

"You'd no business to stare at me through the window—or to come in—or to come at all——"

She broke off. Her indignation struck her as rather silly. She could surely find some more subtle way of getting rid of him. . . . But the next minute he showed her that a bludgeon was likely to be her best weapon after all.

He said wistfully:

"It's Christmas Day."

"Hell! don't I know it? But I never heard that Christmas gave you free entry into people's houses—people you've solemnly engaged never

to see or speak to again," she added, bringing up moral reinforcements.

"But I've got a Christmas present for you."

She saw that he had put down a little coloured box on the table beside her.

"I can't help that. You should have known better."

He looked dashed.

"Please go," she urged him. "I don't want to seem brutal, but you drive me to it. You had no right to force your way in here."

She really was angry with him, for his coming like that had put her at a disadvantage. He had found her muddled and startled, so that she had begun the interview in the wrong way. If only she had had her wits about her and fenced him properly it would not have mattered if Michael had come back and found him there. But now if Michael came he would find her coping tensely and inadequately with what was obviously a passionate situation; he would drop right into a part of her life that she was more than ever determined to keep from him. If he saw her like this, striving to smother the blazing cinders of an old flirtation, he would be convinced once for all that she was a fraud and her resistance bogus. And it was all the fault of this blundering donkey, this clumsy fool, this deluded sentimentalist with his Christmas presents and fairy Princesses . . . her thoughts must have gathered like clouds on her face for he cried out painfully:

"Brenda, don't look at me like that. I can't bear it. Oh, Brenda, say that you still love me!"

"How could I possibly say such a thing? I haven't even pretended to love you."

He looked aghast.

"But your letter . . . you said in your letter——"

"Which letter?" she temporized, knowing what he would say before he cried:

"The letter you wrote me six weeks ago, when you asked me not to come here any more—for your sake. I've got it here . . ." and he took out his wallet and fumbled in it.

She forced herself to speak calmly.

"Yes, I know. I wrote that second letter, because you refused to take any notice of my first. So I tried a new technique. That's all."

"You mean," he stammered, "that you didn't really . . . that you weren't serious? . . ."

She must go on since she'd begun and finish the job properly; but she did not like it, and felt angrier with him than ever for making her do it.

She said:

"You may take it as that."

His face looked drained of every drop of blood. In its greyness it seemed more than ever like a dog's—a beaten dog's. . . .

"But, Brenda," he cried, "I can't believe it. You wouldn't do it. You wouldn't do a thing like that."

A sudden sense of shame plunged her into fresh confusion. Then she felt angry with him again for making her ashamed. What right had he to take a moral line over such a matter? A man has no business to fall in love if he can't allow for tactics.

"Why shouldn't I do it?" she cried. "Any woman would. Has it never occurred to you that a woman wants peace? I did it in self-defence. There were you, plaguing me every day, and your wife begging me to do something about you or you'd put yourself out. I'd tried plain language and it hadn't succeeded, so I decided to write the thing up a bit. You've no one but yourself to blame for that."

It was not till she had finished speaking that she realized what she had said. She had revealed his wife's complicity, though she had promised never to do so. She was angry with herself, for she disliked the idea of having broken her word and she was sorry for poor Jess Marlott and did not wish to embarrass her. She could hear her saying in her tense voice: "If my husband knew that we'd discussed him together I believe he'd kill me." That, of course, was only her iron-clad way of saying that he would be angry and upset, an instance of that mental lumbering which made everything a matter of life or death—except, Brenda remembered, death itself. The Marlotts were both heavy as tanks and it seemed strange that they should not get on

together, being so much alike. Even this indiscretion of hers was due to his clumsiness. If he had not bundled her half awake into a discussion, she would have kept her balance and not betrayed poor Jess.

As she gazed at him she wondered if she had betrayed her after all. His face looked blank. Perhaps he hadn't taken in what she'd said. . . . But the next minute he repeated in a dazed voice:

"My wife . . . what did you say about my wife?"

"Only that she must be at her wits' end, with you carrying on like this."

"You—you said she'd been begging you to do something about me."

"Well?" she cried impatiently.

She thought in a hurry: should she deny the whole thing? Declare that she'd never said what he thought, that he'd made a mistake? But that would be silly. He wouldn't believe her and she would only make the matter sound worse. Besides, she knew from experience that it was fatal to involve oneself in a chain of lying—one always tripped up somewhere, as she had tripped over that damned letter. . . . And the whole business wasn't worth a lie. In fact it might do him good to realize the desperate courses into which other people had been driven by his behaviour.

He was saying:

"Do you know my wife?"

"Yes, I've met her once or twice. She came to see me about two months ago, when she'd first heard about us."

"She came to see you?"

Something in his voice made Brenda feel uneasy. Her own voice became more conciliatory.

"It was natural that she should, and I'm very glad she did. She thought I was a wicked adventuress who'd got you in my clutches, and she came determined to get you out. When she found out that I was harmless we became quite friendly. I liked her."

He passed his hand over his face. When he took it away there was a wild look in his eyes.

"Brenda, are you telling me that you—that you've given me up—for her sake?"

Hell! Had she brought all that on herself again?

"No, of course not. I promised her I'd stop seeing you, but all I was giving up was a pleasant friendship. Surely you always knew that. You must always have known I wasn't in love with you."

"But your letter . . ."

How she wished that she had never written it! She had been much too clever—a smart Alec, a slick Dick, a Miss Sharp; and she remembered Jess's words: "Clever things don't work with us" . . . They certainly didn't.

"That wasn't till afterwards. That wasn't till she came to see me again and told me she was more worried about you than ever. She wanted me to try something else." She had forgotten what Jess had actually wanted her to try. "You wouldn't take a plain statement, so I thought of a better way. I'm sorry now I tried it—you weren't the right man to try it on."

"Did—did she know you didn't mean anything in that letter?"

"I suppose so. I don't think she altogether approved of my writing it."

"Have you seen her since?"

He was firing questions at her like an examiner, but his face was more like the face of a terrified candidate, with sweat on the forehead.

"Yes," she answered. "I met her about a fortnight ago in Pot-common. She was feeling ill, so I took her into the Grenadier Inn and we had tea together."

"And did you talk about me?"

"I expect we did. Why shouldn't we?"

She was tired of his questions. "Look here," she went on quickly, edging in her words before another, "your wife's a delightful woman—and she's very ill at present; very ill. You should look after her and forget all about me."

He stared at her without speaking.

"When I saw her then," she continued, "she'd just been to consult a

doctor. And he'd given her a very bad report—I wonder if she's told you about it."

He did not answer, and she suddenly found his silence more disturbing than his questions. She spoke again, to fill in the pause.

"I think your wife's the sort of woman who'd suffer a great deal in silence, so perhaps she hasn't told you what the doctor said. She might want to keep it from you; but——"

He broke in suddenly:

"Hold your tongue—stop chattering—or I'll kill you."

Brenda turned pale, but it was with anger rather than fear. He had startled her, but her deepest feeling was disgust at this fresh example of the Marlott tank in motion.

"Please don't speak to me in that silly way," she said quietly.

"I want to know——" he began again in a harsh, new voice, "you've got to tell me how many times you and my wife have sat here and talked about me."

"Twice—that's all. And I don't see that it matters if it was a hundred times."

He stared at her strangely from under brows that seemed suddenly to have turned shaggy. If he still looked like a dog it was a mad dog, and in spite of herself she felt a qualm.

"My dear friend," she said, trying to soothe him now, "aren't you making rather heavy weather about all this?"

"Heavy weather . . ." he repeated dully.

"Yes; isn't it rather exaggerating the situation to make such a fuss about two women getting together and talking about a man? It's a very usual thing, you know."

"But you and she together . . . I can't bear the thought—it's driving me mad . . . you and she conspiring to betray me—to tell me lies—to write me that lie. . . ."

"Don't make a mistake," she said quickly. "Your wife didn't want me to write that letter. It was my own idea entirely. She disapproved of it."

"But she knew you were going to write it."

"I can't even be sure of that. And anyway it doesn't matter." Her

anger was mounting again as through the window she saw the dusk gathering round the tops of the trees, and knew that at any moment Michael would be home, to find her wallowing in melodrama . . . "You've stayed here long enough," she cried harshly. "For God's sake go now and leave me in peace."

"I'll go," he said in a muffled voice, "but first I'll——"

He made one stride towards her and seized her wrist. She was taken unaware and shrank from him, but the next moment recovered herself and met his eyes. In them she saw a look that nearly made her shrink again, but they suddenly changed and he stepped back from her, flinging away her wrist with a violence that was almost a blow.

"No," he said between his clenched teeth. "No—you aren't worth it."

When, what seemed ages later, she again heard footsteps in the hall, she started up from the sofa, thinking that they might be his, coming back. But the footsteps doubled themselves and the next minute Michael and Lucinda came into the room in a cold glow.

"Hullo, Mummy," said her daughter. "We've been as far as Bibleham. Did you have a good rest?"

"No, not particularly."

Barney's eyes were keen.

"Everything right, my dear? You look rather done."

She said:

"It was a mistake to go to sleep so soon after eating Christmas pudding. I had a nightmare."

PART IV

LIGHT IN DARKNESS

HARRY COBSALE

DURING Christmas night the weather changed. Towards one o'clock the wind veered to the east, and blew down the marsh against the river. The cold changed from a pearl to a diamond. By daylight all the mists were gone, and distances were close in the snapping air. Rushmonden broke out of the fields in a splatter of coloured roofs, and the fields were darkly shaped by their hedges, as if drawn by a child with a labouring pencil. Everything was clear except the sky. A tower of clouds piled up against the springing light, and then suddenly the snow fell.

It seemed to come as a surprise to that southern country. Immediately the wind dropped and there was a great hush. The flakes grew larger and eddied slowly down. To Harry Cobsale, watching them from his bed, they seemed darker than the sky behind them. He watched them with a sort of boyish interest; it must be two years at least since he had seen snow.

Apart from its novelty he did not welcome it. It was bound to turn to slush before long, and it would make the ground heavier even than it normally was in winter and out-door work more difficult. It also made getting up more difficult—the temperature of his eastward room could have been only a few degrees higher than out of doors—and this morning he did not want any further temptation to sloth. Normally he was spry enough, but to-day he would have been unwilling to leave his bed even without the snow.

He felt heavy in all his limbs, especially in his head. Certainly he had drunk too much last night—and who should blame him? He did not blame himself, but he wished he hadn't, all the same. It was all very well to forget your troubles for a bit and feel on the top of the

world, but unless you were the sort of chap who never feels the consequences—and Harry was not lucky in that way—you had to pay more than the thing was worth next morning.

Not that he had been drunk in the usual sense of the word—at least not drunk and disorderly or drunk and incapable. He had done nothing to dim the respectability of Mr. Tilden's pub, like that wretched chap from the chicken farm. Drunk was the only word for him—drunk and incapable. He'd fallen his length on the floor . . . they'd had to lift him like a sack into Mr. Sharman's car. . . . He hadn't taken such a terrible lot, either; just wasn't used to it, Harry supposed. He didn't know the fellow at all well, and didn't want to now. *He* must have a fine headache this morning—his own could be nothing to it. In fact he was not sure now that he had a headache at all.

The ache seemed rather in his heart. His heart, which since six o'clock yesterday evening had been peacefully at rest under the successive anæsthesias of whisky and sleep, was now returning to pain—the pain which had driven him nearly mad all Christmas Day till he had found a means of allaying it. He could feel it quicken as he lay and watched the snow falling dingily against the light. It was a composite agony, mixed of hate, rage, pity, longing, grief and shame. Shame was the smallest ingredient, and as he dwelt on it it became smaller still through chemical changes into hate—which was less an ingredient than the crucible in which all seethed together.

He was ashamed of having made an exhibition of himself before Joan, but such a shame only fed his hatred of Richard who had provoked that exhibition and triumphed through it. His pity for Joan passed too into hatred of the man whose selfish tyranny was at the bottom of her troubles, his longing for her into hatred of the man who possessed her, his grief, born of that longing, into envy borne of that hatred. His heart was sick and inflamed with hate and he saw no relief for it till he could drug it again with yesterday's doubtful remedy.

Meanwhile he had better get up and see what work would do for him. Lying in bed and watching the snow would only land him more helplessly at the mercy of his furies. There was not likely to be much to do on the farm till the snow had stopped and melted away, but at

least he could walk round and see to things. It would be easy to avoid Richard.

He and his brother had so perfected the practice of their enmity that normally they could work the morning through without meeting. Though everything had been left to them in a common lump, their estrangement had made a surface division of the farm's activities. Harry attended to the stock in certain fields and Richard to those in others; even the hop acreage was divided between them, since neither would entirely remove his hand from a single aspect of their joint inheritance. Chodd or another of the men acted as go-between if any necessity arose, and the brothers' only forced association was at meals. Even that could be avoided for the first half of to-day, at least; for Harry's stomach turned on him at the mere thought of breakfast. He would make himself a cup of tea before he went out—the kettle was always left on the hob for that purpose—and then do comfortably without more till dinner-time.

It was part of the general contrariness of things that for his first hour out of doors he was all the time only just escaping Richard. He seemed to be everywhere—in the cow-lodge, though he hated and despised Harry's milking machine; in the hen-house, where he had no business at all, and in the cake-house, though Harry had gone in only to avoid him in the yard. After a time he came to the conclusion that Richard was deliberately dogging him round—either he wanted to provoke him, or he was spying on him, for fear that he spoke to Joan. The temperature of his hatred rose in the bitter cold.

Then suddenly Richard challenged him. Harry had gone into the cart-lodge, which Chodd said was leaking, and just as he turned back towards the yard Richard stepped out from behind the big blue wagon which mocked their quarrel with its "H. and R. Cobsale" under "Loats Farm" on the beam. He stood between his brother and his escape into the falling snow.

"Stop," he said. "I want to speak to you."

Harry's first impulse was to push past him—push him over, if need be—and get away. But the next moment he suddenly realized the advantages of free speech.

"Right you are; speak and I'll speak too. It's as good as Christmas Day."

Richard said:

"Will you take three thousand pounds to clear out?"

Harry stared at him.

"Would I hell?"

"I'm asking you: will you take three thousand pounds to clear out?"

"And I'll ask you: where are you going to get three thousand pounds?"

"From the sale of the hop quota," said Richard promptly. "We could get all that for it, and I'd let you have the lot if you'd go."

Harry saw how desperately Richard must want to get rid of him; but the thought gave him only a little satisfaction, for he guessed how the matter had come about. Richard had spent yesterday at Waxend, and Chaffield had put him up to this. He might even have told him that if he got rid of Harry he'd stock up Loats for him with sheep and beasts and they'd run it together as a grazier's business.

"I'm not going," he said. "I tell you straight out: I'm not going, even if you offer me ten thousand."

"If you had three thousand pounds you could buy a place of your own," said Richard.

"While you grub up all the hops and run Loats entirely as a bloody grazing farm. That's what you'd like to do—I bet it is. But you shan't do it."

"You don't seem to realize," said Richard, still speaking patiently, "that even if I did, you'd still be getting the best of the bargain."

"I shouldn't. This is my place; I'm the eldest son, so I've first right to it."

"It was left to us both, and if we sell the hops and you take all the money no one can say I'm doing you out of your share."

Harry saw this, and had he been in a condition to think calmly it would have weighed with him. Much as he wanted to be at Loats, proud as he was of it and anxious to save it from his brother's cow-keeping, he could not be blind to the advantages of leaving it for a

place where he would be his own master both in the house and in the field. But for its motive, Richard's offer might be considered magnificent. Three thousand pounds was the price of a good little farm and on any normal occasion Harry would have considered himself a fool to reject it. But in his present state, the only thought that influenced him was what would annoy his brother most; and undoubtedly Richard wanted him to go. The magnitude of his bribe showed that. He wanted to run the farm in his own degraded way; and perhaps, after yesterday, he had become nervous about his brother and his missus . . .

"You must be scared of me," said Harry, laughing unpleasantly. "You must be scared of my making too much of a hit with Joan."

Richard turned crimson.

"You can leave Joan out of it."

"Not after yesterday. Not after the hell you made just because I tried to be decent to the poor kid—to make up a bit to her on Christmas Day for the way you've treated her."

Richard clenched his fist.

"Look here," he said in a strangely quiet voice, "don't you try starting all that over again. You got the worst of it, remember."

"I shan't this time," said Harry.

"I think you will," said Richard, and knocked him down.

For a moment Harry was senseless. He did not know that he was lying on his back staring at the beams of the cart-lodge. Then he noticed the cobwebs hanging like veils among them, but he still did not know where he was or think it strange that he should be gazing up at them like that. It was a full half-minute before complete awareness came and by then Richard had disappeared.

Harry scrambled to his feet, his head singing. He could see his brother walking away across the yard towards the house. He charged after him like an angry bull, seized him by the shoulders and swung him round. For a moment they struggled together, their feet slithering in the melting snow, which muffled the noise of their fighting, so that this time no womenkind came rushing to interfere. It was Richard's strength alone which brought Harry suddenly to his knees, and then

flung him over sideways so violently that he lay his full length in the trodden slush. Once again he was knocked out—for no more than twenty seconds, but long enough to give Richard time to escape into the house.

At first Harry thought of following him. His face swelled, his heart pumped with fury . . . he would go after Richard and knock his teeth down his throat . . . Richard should pay for this—for taking advantage of a better man—for trading on his brother's hangover to attack him unprovoked. If Harry had been in his normal state of fitness Richard could never have knocked him down—knocked him down twice—twice in two minutes . . . memory jibed, and for a moment rage nearly triumphed over experience. But his first step towards the house showed him that if he had not been fit the first thing in the morning he was still more unfit now, after having twice, as it were, taken the count. His head sang and the walls of the house had a wavering look.

Better let his anger wait—it would not cool. Later on, when he was himself again he would have his revenge and enjoy it richly. He was taller than Richard—and stronger. Give him a fair encounter and he could punish him as much as he liked. He would maul him, maim him . . . at that moment he wanted not only Richard's blood but his bones—his broken bones. He would like to set about him with a beadle—or what about emptying a barrel of small shot into his backside?

He pondered the thought affectionately, loving it so much that he nearly went straightaway to fetch his gun. But, he reflected, if Richard was in the house—he had run there for safety—it might be difficult to get at him now; and, anyway, a thick night was probably as bad for one's aim as for one's punch. Better wait till the effects had worn off and then let Richard see. . . . Meanwhile he would get off the place. The snow was clearing and a sharp, white light had climbed up the sky. A walk in the wintry air would do him good—set him up again—bring him closer to his revenge; and at eleven o'clock he would be able to get another drink.

The snow had stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and in the clear

stillness the fields lay wearing that rather strange, unreal look which snow brings to the south. To Harry's unaccustomed eyes there was something almost sinister in the changed country-side—no red roofs, no golden stacks, no brown woods or green meadows, no distinction between the rich pasture of the home fields and the barren sogginess of the river snapes. The snow was like death—levelling all things, shrouding rich and poor alike. He was glad when, as he walked down the hill, a sudden sword of sunshine pierced the clouds and gleamed on the marsh ahead of him. If the sky cleared, the ground would soon clear too, and all things return to life and their due order.

He had decided to walk across the marsh to Rushmonden. It was a five-mile walk—which ought to stir him up a bit—and after last night he was anxious to avoid the pub at Woodhorn. Not that, as he repeatedly told himself, he had been visibly drunk, but his memories were for the most part inglorious. Besides, he did not care for the fellows at the Plough; they talked too much about him. If he dropped in for a couple of whiskies this morning they would be sure to say that Harry Cobsale was drinking himself to death. He would rather go where he was less known and more respected (his mind produced no comment on this situation). He did not mean to drink immoderately again, but he wouldn't be right till he'd had those whiskies. When he'd had them and walked the five miles home, he'd be fit to tackle Richard and wop him with one hand tied behind his back.

Just above the elbow of the lane the bare trees allowed him an early sight of Chequers Cottage. It startled him with its whiteness, as it stood there, empty and broken at the road-side. The snow had drifted over it from the back, smoothing the lump of its attic window, softening the jagged line of destruction which the demolition men had left. He had not really seen the place since they started work, and now he realized with a sort of shock that only half of it was there—it was broken off just beyond the porch. To-day, being a holiday, nobody was at work, and the stillness combined with the snow to give the broken house a sinister look. . . . But to-morrow the men would be back, and soon it would all have disappeared—and a good job, too. He would be glad when nothing remained of Chequers Cottage but,

maybe, a few vegetables and border flowers springing up unnaturally among the grass of Four Legged Crouch.

That was another reason why he did not want to go back to the Plough: everyone there was talking about Nan Scallow. The police had got her at last—they had found her and her mother hiding with some of their gipsy relatives in a caravan as far away as Clun in Salop; and they were bringing them both back to stand their trial at Lewes. There had been a number of odd looks at Harry in the bar. He did not know why everybody should be so determined the child was his, considering it might have been fathered by half a dozen of the Plough's customers. But he supposed that being a bigger man he had made a bigger scandal. Through the whisperings of the bar he could hear Richard's voice: "You'd better go down to Chequers and see what the police are doing about that brat of yours they've dug up" . . . and his hatred of Richard suddenly ceased to be the simple force that was driving him across the marsh for a drink at Rushmonden, but became once more a seething complexity of emotions any one of which was liable at any moment to blow him up.

He had reached the foot of the hill, and stood staring at the padlocked door of Chequers Cottage. They had put a padlock too on the door at the head of the stairs. . . . Why hadn't the demolition men pulled down that end first? Then perhaps he wouldn't see himself going up those stairs, knocking at the door, going in to Nan Scallow, to hide himself in her darkness, because he could not bear Joan's light. He had gone to her to escape from Joan, from the sight of so much sweetness and loveliness belonging to Richard. He had been a fool. He should have got even with Richard by finding a sweet lovely one of his own. There was no good telling himself he couldn't have done so—he hadn't even tried. There were plenty of sweet and lovely girls about, and he was not unattractive as a man—the girls had always fallen for him pretty easily, and he might just as well have had a decent one for a change. Of course no decent girl would have looked at him unless he had made himself fit to look at a decent girl; but he could have done that—he wasn't so far gone that he couldn't have done that—instead of running away and getting himself into a still

worse mess. . . . Of course he had done it partly to pay out Richard—but what harm had it done Richard? It had done no harm to anybody but himself. . . . Looking back on those days, he seemed to have been possessed by an evil spirit—a spirit which possessed him still.

He'd feel better when he'd had a drink . . . but before he passed Chequers Cottage he went up and put his face against one of the empty windows. What should he see inside? Only snow, which had drifted down through the broken roof and lay in a heap on the floor. That was the Norrups' place. It did not really interest him, but he felt a queer urge to see the rest, to go up the outside stair and try the door at the top, on the chance that he might get in. Why should he want to get in? into Nan's dreadful room? . . . the attraction frightened him, yet it was there. He felt a queer, pleasureless desire to go up those stairs—to that door. . . . In some such way might a ghost be pulled to a scene of past disgrace. He must be in a bad way. . . . He'd feel better when he'd had a drink.

With an effort he swung round from the window, and was startled to find that he was no longer alone in the small white landscape of Four Legged Crouch. A girl was coming rapidly towards him—Lucinda Light—her footsteps noiseless in the snow. He had the extraordinary and senseless feeling that he had been caught doing something he ought not.

"Hullo," he said in a loud voice, "what brings *you* here?"

As he said it he asked himself why he had to speak to her like that? Was he really incapable of speaking to a decent girl? Here was one before him, in many ways better than Richard's Joan—better born, better bred, better looking (though he still thought she was too tall)—and he had been unable to say good morning to her politely. Something was turning him into a bounder. He really must take hold of himself . . .

She said quietly:

"I'm looking for the Malpases. You haven't seen them by any chance?"

"No, I haven't. I haven't seen a soul since I came out."

"I expect they've gone on to Moll Kemp's Grave. We were all

going there this morning, but I wasn't ready when they called for me."

He felt a little comforted by her manner, which was friendly in spite of the odiousness of his.

"Look here," he said, "I'm sorry I spoke so rudely a minute ago. But you gave me a start."

"You weren't rude. I could see you were startled when you looked round."

"It's the snow—you don't hear people coming."

"I know. But isn't it lovely? Do you think it will lie?"

He shook his head.

"It never lies around here. The temperature must have risen five or six degrees since it stopped. Listen!"

Through the stillness came the dripping of Chequers' eaves.

They both looked up, and then their eyes lingered on the broken wall.

"There's not much left of it now," said Harry.

"And you're still not sorry they're taking it down?"

"No; it was a bad old house."

She said:

"I've often felt that." Then suddenly she asked him: "Have you heard anything more about Nan Scallow?"

She could not know about him, then, or a decent girl like her would never have asked.

"Yes," he said, "the police have got her."

"Oh. . . ." She turned pale, or paler, rather, for her skin was never darker than cream. "Then they'll hang her. . . ."

"No, they won't hang her. There's a law against hanging the mother of a new-born child! Seemingly, they're not considered responsible for their actions."

As if any action of Nan Scallow's was less than cold, calculating villainy.

She seemed a little reassured, though still distressed.

"Then it won't be so bad for her as it was for Moll Kemp—it isn't happening quite the same way as it did before."

He remembered that he had always thought her a very queer girl.

"I don't know anything about Moll Kemp," he said, "only that there's a place on the marsh called Moll Kemp's Grave. I'm going that way now, so if it's your way too, may I go with you?"

"Thanks very much," she answered politely, and they walked on together through the snow, which was already turning brown under their footsteps.

For some minutes they walked in silence. He could not think of anything to say and she seemed depressed. He wondered if she was still upset about Nan Scallow. He thought it preposterous that she should waste her pity on such an object, and after a time he began:

"You're not still worrying about that girl, are you?"

"I can't help worrying about her."

He said severely:

"She's a bad lot and doesn't deserve any kind thoughts from you."

"I don't see that—besides, it isn't only for her sake."

"Whose is it, then?"

He felt suddenly anxious, in case it was his.

"It would be rather difficult to explain. It's mixed up with something else I'm worried about."

He remembered that Nan had been going daily for two months to the Old Parsonage.

"I should never have let you take her on."

"You mustn't blame yourself for that. You really were quite discouraging. It was only that we were desperate to find someone. . . . Mummy knew there was a risk; so you mustn't blame yourself. How's Joan?"

Joan! What had Joan got to do with it? Then he guessed that she was trying to turn the conversation. So she *must* know about him and Nan Scallow. . . . His heart sank, and it was not till she repeated her question that he realized he hadn't answered it.

"Oh, Joan . . . she's all right. At least, that's as far as I know. I haven't seen her since yesterday morning."

"Since yesterday morning?"

"No. She spent the day at Waxend."

"Oh, I see. . . . Did—did you give her that present you bought for her?"

Yes, of course; he remembered how she had got in a terrification about that work-basket—begged him not to give it to Joan, not to quarrel with Richard. She *was* a queer girl.

"Yes, I gave it to her."

"And was she pleased?"

"You bet she was."

"And did your brother mind?"

"You bet he did."

He felt his manner changing as he spoke. He was being offensive again . . . swaggering and sneering. He saw her eyes darken in a curious way, and tried desperately to recover his lost grace.

"Don't let's talk about him. How did you spend Christmas?"

She responded at once.

"We didn't do anything special during the day, but in the evening Mr. Barney took my mother and me and Humfrey Malpas to a dance at a hotel in Marlingate."

Mr. Barney . . . that was her mother's fancy man. They knew all about him at the Plough.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Very much, thank you—though I only danced a little. Mr. Barney dances very well, but he danced mostly with my mother."

"And did you have to sit all by yourself looking on?"

He felt suddenly full of compassion and indignation. He seemed to see her sitting there like a forsaken fairy, in a shining white and silver dress, with a silver crown on her golden hair—a princess without a prince.

"Oh, no," she said, "I'd Humfrey with me. He's not a very good dancer, but he talked a lot."

"Humfrey Malpas? Why, he's not turned fourteen, has he?"

"He's fourteen and a half, but we couldn't think of anyone else to bring to make a fourth. It makes me feel ashamed not to have been up when he called this morning, for he must have gone to bed just as late as I did."

Harry thought to himself: I might have been there. If I'd been a different sort of chap maybe they'd have asked me to be a fourth. I'm a yeoman farmer and my sister-in-law's her great friend. I've got a tail suit and I can dance. If I'd had a good name instead of a bad one, they'd have asked me to come with them instead of that kid. Then I could have danced with her.

He saw himself in the tail suit which he had not worn since the Marsh Harriers' ball two years ago, dancing with a lovely girl in a shining white and silver dress, with a silver crown on her golden hair—the prince of a princess.

The picture did not make him feel altogether happy, and they fell once more into silence. He glanced at her and thought that she looked harassed and uneasy. Surely she could not still be worrying about Nan Scallow.

"Look here," he said, "you mustn't let that girl upset you. People like her are best in prison—out of the way."

"I know—but it isn't really her I'm worrying about. It's you."

"Me!" Once more he was swaggering on the defensive. "Why should you worry about me?"

"Because I'm afraid—I'm sure that if you don't take care, something dreadful is going to happen—quite soon."

So that was what was biting her, was it? That crazy idea she had been on about in the 'bus. She knew nothing about him and Nan. A profound relief swept over him, and he asked more gently:

"What sort of thing?"

"I told you when we were in the 'bus; and I begged you not to give that present to Joan. Now you've given it—and I'm afraid—I'm afraid . . ."

She suddenly stood still, biting her finger in its woollen glove. She was trembling.

"Look here," he said, "you really mustn't take on like that. What does it matter if I have given Joan a present? She was pleased enough to get it, poor kid, and I can't see anything wrong in being friends with my own sister-in-law."

"But if it upsets your brother and leads to more quarrelling. . . . You told me he wasn't pleased."

"He wasn't."

How she would create if she knew what really had happened.

"There it is. You've made matters worse instead of better."

"I daresay I have—with him. But you don't understand. It's not him I care about—it's Joan. I'm sorry for her, because I know it upsets her, us all being so unfriendly. She wants us to be friends—she told me so yesterday morning."

"Did she? And did the present make you all more friendly? . . ."

Harry could not say that it did.

"It made her and me more friendly," he pushed stoutly, as they walked on.

"But that doesn't help. It only makes matters worse. Richard will think——"

"I don't care what Richard thinks. It's her I care about, and I'm surprised that you don't care about her too, being her friend."

Her eyes met his, and he was startled by their darkness under her golden fringe.

"I do care about her," she said. "That's why I'm trying to save her. You don't understand. She loves him."

Something in her voice embarrassed and vexed him strangely.

"I don't believe she does," he blustered, "not now—not really. She wouldn't be such a fool as to love a man who treats her the way he does. I saw him myself yesterday morning push her against the table."

"He may have lost his temper for a minute. But that only shows how—how—dangerous things are getting. For he loves her really and truly. I know he does. And she loves him—I'm her friend and I know it; she loves him more than—more than—— Oh, anything I could say."

"Then he's a double-dyed brute to make her so unhappy."

"But she isn't unhappy—not unhappy at all. She's happy because she's with him and she doesn't really mind about the rest. Oh," again she stood still, wringing her hands this time, "don't you know what love is?"

He looked at her in astonishment. Her great eyes seemed to hold the depths of innocence in their darkness. He asked:

"Do you?"

"Yes, of course I know. I can't help it. Anyone who's ever loved anyone must know. I don't mean love between sweethearts or husbands and wives, but loving another person more than yourself—as Joan does—as I've done. . . . You're happy if you're doing things to please them, even if it hurts you to do them. You'd rather do something you don't like than go against their wishes. If you make Joan do anything that displeases Richard, you'll only make her miserable—no matter how much she would like to be friendly if he didn't mind. You're making her unhappy now. It's you that are doing it—not Richard. There's nothing that makes you more unhappy than if anyone is mean or unkind to the person you love; and if that person should—should—die . . ."

"No fear of that, worse luck."

"Oh, yes there is—you've just said it."

"Said what?"

"That you want him to die. You hate him and you want him to die—and that can always lead to murder."

"My God! D'you think I'd risk being swung for Richard?"

"You mightn't mean to kill him. But, oh . . . oh, please take care . . . please believe me . . . this is a dangerous day."

She was crazier than ever. But he could not help feeling flattered by her interest in him. He said:

"I don't see how it can make any difference to you."

"There is a reason, but I can't tell you now."

They had come within a few yards of Puddledock Bridge, and in the doorway of the Ironlatch House figures were waiting. He said:

"Perhaps you'll tell me some day."

"I don't suppose I ever could. But, please—oh, please——" She broke off.

"Please what?"

She shook her head.

"I've said it before and it sounds so silly to say it again."

“Say it all the same.”

“I was going to say: ‘Please take care.’ ”

A gentler mood was on him, and he felt sorry to lose her company.

“All right, I’ll take care. I’ll think over what you’ve said. There! Does that make you feel better?”

She smiled without speaking as they shook hands.

LUCINDA LIGHT

"LET's hurry up and start the film," said Humfrey. "We begin with the casting. Lucinda, you shall be Moll Kemp."

"Oh . . ."

"I want to be Moll Kemp," said Petronilla.

"Well, you can't. Lucinda's the eldest."

"But she doesn't look the part."

"How do you know? She probably looks exactly like her. And anyway, you don't. Moll Kemp, whoever she was, wasn't a fat ugly child of twelve with pig-tails."

"And Dickory wasn't a thin little squirt of fourteen with spectacles."

"I can't help my spectacles. Dickory was a man, and I'm the only man here, so I must play him."

"Man! Ha! Ha! That's good. Just because Mrs. Light couldn't find a real man to go to the ball with Lucinda last night, so had to take you, you think that you're a man, instead of a skinny little school-boy. Yah!"

"Well, I was considered enough of a man to drink champagne and stop up till three in the morning. Yah!"

Leonora created a diversion.

"I want to be Moll Kemp."

"You can't. I want you for all sorts of parts—the landlord of the Chequers and Farmer Hodge and the Duke of Beaulieu and a Bow Street Runner . . ."

"They're men. I thought you said women couldn't play men's parts. If they can, I want to be Dickory."

"You can't be Dickory—it's the chief part and it would look ridiculous if it was played by a girl."

"Then the others would look ridiculous too, and I certainly shan't play them. Let Nigel be the landlord and all that lot."

"I want to be Moll Kemp," piped Nigel.

"You're to be Moll Kemp's baby."

"I don't want to be a baby—I'm not a baby and I won't act a baby."

"But the baby's murdered," coaxed Humfrey. "It's a lovely part."

"I don't want to be murdered. I want to be Moll Kemp."

The Malpases seemed to be quarrelling and Lucinda listened anxiously. She was never quite sure whether they were really angry with one another or whether their arguments and abuse were all part of a game she did not quite understand.

"I really would much rather not be Moll Kemp," she said at the first opportunity, "it's not a part I feel I could play very well."

"Oh, yes, you could. It's just the part for you. You're the only one who's the right age for it."

"And I, I suppose, am the right age for the landlord of the Chequers," said Leonora witheringly.

"But I really feel it would be a too heavy part for me," persevered Lucinda. "I know it's awful of me, but I still feel very tired and sleepy after last night."

"All the more reason for you to play Moll Kemp. She has practically nothing to do—in fact, she's in hiding most of the time. Do be a sport, Lucinda, and take the part, or it'll be time to go home before we've settled anything."

Lucinda realized that if she did not play Moll Kemp, Humfrey would never be able to decide between the rival claims of his sisters. She did not like the idea, but if she really was to be in hiding most of the time she would not have to think about it much. So she agreed, with apologetic smiles to Leonora and Petronilla who, however, realizing that the part was now definitely a minor one, withdrew their opposition with an amiability that surprised her.

The landlord of the Chequers became the landlady and was undertaken by Petronilla on condition that the Duke of Beaulieu equally became the Duchess who, she decided privately, should run away with

the film. On the same basis, Nigel accepted the part of Moll Kemp's baby with the promise that once he was murdered he should become Lionel Lovelock, assistant highwayman to Dickory. Leonora was more difficult to placate until they had the brilliant notion of making her the camera man. She thought she could easily combine this activity with the part of the Bow Street Runner, who could not be left out.

So, about half an hour after the company had assembled, the film started—on a snow-white set lit by a Christmas sun. The action was rather confused at first, owing to conflicts of opinion between the actors; they spent a great deal of time standing about and arguing and feeling cold. Lucinda was not enjoying herself. When she had promised to attend a meeting of the Antiquarian Society at Moll Kemp's Grave she had had no idea of anything but the usual sort of affair. It was the communal gift of a toy ciné-camera, taking a picture fifty inches long, which had brought about the change. The story of Moll Kemp and Dickory was to be the first production of the Antiquarian Artists into which the society had transformed itself while waiting for Lucinda to arrive this morning.

A shot was first taken of Humfrey, changed into Dickory by the exiguous magic of a mackintosh cape. He did a great deal of swaggering, with oaths of the oddsfish kind, in spite of the fact that the picture was necessarily silent. The technique was to use a few inches of film and then let the action continue unrecorded in the interests of economy. Unless some financier—and Lucinda understood that Michael Barney was not despaired of—came forward to supply funds for the requisite amount of film, the actors must be content with the memory of their performances, supplemented by a few seconds on the screen.

Owing to Nigel's insistence on becoming Lionel Lovelock at the first possible moment, the second shot had to be of the murder of Moll Kemp's baby, releasing Lucinda even earlier than she had hoped. She was to go into hiding in the Ironlatch House, having firmly resisted Humfrey's preference for the reeds of the Withy Channel. Even Lucinda's disposition to oblige everybody had failed at the prospect of so bleak a refuge. The Ironlatch House was not exactly warm, but

at least it was dry. The remains of an old farm-cart still stood in it, and on the most dependable shaft of this she settled herself, hugging round her shoulders the plaid shawl that had turned her into Moll Kemp.

Humfrey gave her his final instructions.

"Wait here till you hear Dickory arriving and then come out, and we'll have a shot of us both in the entrance—it's too dark inside."

"Did Moll Kemp have anything to do with Dickory?"

She wanted to know how his version of the story went.

"Of course she did. It was she who betrayed him to the Bow Street Runners."

"How do you know? There's nothing about it in the Guide Book. It only says that she was hanged for child murder."

"So she was. But she betrayed Dickory first."

Lucinda did not trouble to ask him for the sources of his knowledge. There was a story of Moll Kemp and Dickory in Humfrey's head, just as there was a story of Moll Kemp and Dickory in hers, and of neither story was there any real proof or confirmation in the world of facts. She sat down on the shaft and watched him disappear into the shining continent of the marsh. Now that he was gone she did not have to be Moll Kemp any longer.

It seemed almost an irreverent travesty of a solemn subject that she should be playing the part of Moll Kemp after the news she had just heard from Harry Cobsale about Nan Scallow. That news had shaken and distressed her deeply, for it held a threat that went beyond the limits of the present situation. Even though, according to Harry Cobsale, Nan Scallow was not likely to be hanged, the threat was not thereby removed, for the difference was due only to the enlightenment of the times, and not to any essential lightening of the dark act which was being repeated. The times had changed, become gentler, more humane; so there would be no gallows for Nan, nor would there be a lonely grave on the marsh. These things were impossible nowadays. But the things that had led up to them two hundred years ago were not impossible. Nan Scallow's crime was as dark as Moll Kemp's, even though her punishment was lighter.

That was the trouble in Lucinda's head: things were happening in the same way even though they might not be leading to quite the same consequences. The horror that haunted Chequers Cottage had repeated itself—and so, it seemed likely, would the horror that haunted Loats Farm. She could already see it, as it were, assembling . . . hatred, envy, and that strange pity which had led to the shooting of Mus' Rowfold and the outlawing of Dickory—they were all there, waiting for Richard Cobsale and his brother. The lightest pressure, the smallest tip of the scales, and Richard would be dead and Harry in flight from a law which would not be so lenient to him as to Nan Scallow.

There was now a definite association in her mind between Dickory and Harry Cobsale. They seemed to belong to the same pattern, and unless she could do something to change it. . . . She had tried—she had tried to-day as they walked across the marsh together; but she did not know if she had succeeded. Uncertainty was made all the more painful by the thought that she had never liked Harry Cobsale so much as she had this morning. He had always attracted her, but in a way that had mixed attraction with repulsion. This morning a queer, defensive, but not unlovable self had come before her and had seemed to ask for her liking. Yes, she liked him, and her liking had become part of the urgency with which she watched the shadows of the past move over him.

Shadows . . . Shadows . . . Shadows have shadows of their own: she had seen them in the woods, just as she had seen in the sky the reflection of a rainbow, itself a reflection. Perhaps these strange things that were happening—then and now—were all reflections of something quite outside this world—all shadows of some invisible darkness; the same unhappy word repeating itself again and again through the years . . .

She drew back from her thoughts. She could not think them alone—they were too disturbing and confusing. So as she had no one with whom she could clear them out, she had better not think them at all. Soon the others would be back, demanding her co-operation. In spite of her reluctance to play Moll Kemp, she would be glad when

they came, and she felt her heart lift as a shadow suddenly blocked the door.

"Hullo—you've been quick . . ."

Her voice died as she looked up, for in the doorway stood none other than Dickory.

"Oh . . ."

She was not afraid; but she was startled. She had never expected to see him here. He stood huddled against the door-post, a sort of tattered sack wrapped round his shoulders. Behind him the snow and sunshine melted and darkened suddenly.

His greeting was strange.

"Eh, my posey. . . ." Then his manner altered and the terrified look she knew so well came back into his eyes. "T'urn't her," he muttered, "'tis dat other." Then: "Oi'm scared."

He must actually have taken her for Moll Kemp. She felt almost ashamed of having deceived him.

"Don't be scared," she said gently, "I'm a friend."

"But whur's Moll Kemp?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know."

"Oi mun find her, but Oi'm weary of sarchun. Whur's Moll Kemp?"

He wrung his hands and looked forlornly at the mysterious moon that had appeared over his shoulder—the moon of a world that was gone.

"I wish I could tell you; but I don't know. Perhaps she isn't far from here. That mound over there on the marsh is called Moll Kemp's Grave."

As she spoke she saw that there was no mound, only the flat moonlit country.

He did not seem to take in her words.

"Oi mun find her," he repeated, "for ever and for ever Oi'm sarching fur her, but Oi döan't sim never to cöame up wud her. Oh, dere's a stack of muddle and trouble in my head."

She felt moved to ask him:

"Why do you want so much to find her?"

"Oi'm scared wudout her, and we mun stick together seeing as de hornies is arter us both."

The hornies: that was the police. She had come across the word in an old book.

"Who put the hornies on your track?"

The terror in his eyes darkened to anguish.

"De liddle Missus."

"Oh . . ."

"Aye, she went agäunst me. Oi stud by her, but she went agäunst me. And Oi wöan't blame her, neither. Oi killed her man. Oi never thought she loved 'un, but she did and Oi killed 'un, and näow she's gone agäunst me."

He groaned deeply and her heart felt tight and swollen with compassion. But what could she do? All this was past—for her; and while she listened she knew that it was not the past that concerned her now, but the future.

"De liddle Missus," he rambled on—and it seemed as if she had never seen him so distressed, "Oi've hurt my liddle Missus and näow she's hurten me. But how wur Oi to know, seeing as he never treated her präaper? Oi mäade certain-sure as she wanted 'un out o' de way. So Oi killed 'un dead. And now Oi'm turble scared of Loats. Oi dursn't go dere."

"You don't have to go there."

He looked at her with his darkening eyes.

"Oi mun go soon. 'Tis pulling me—dat bad öald pläace. Dat's whoy Oi'm sarching fur Moll Kemp. Loats is pulling me and Oi'm scared to go alöan. Reckon Mus' Rowfold's dere and he's waitun fur me. Oi'm scared."

"But surely you don't have to go. . . . And Mus' Rowfold can't hurt you now." It seemed ludicrous that a ghost should be frightened of a ghost.

"Oi reckon he can hurt me a lot if he gits me. And Oi tell 'ee Loats is pulling me näow. De Chequers used to pull wunst, but näow it döan't pull so strong as Loats. 'Tis Loats is pulling me and Oi'm scared to go."

A new, indescribable fear possessed Lucinda.

"You mustn't go to Loats. Whatever happens you mustn't go there."

"Reckon I mun go. Recken dat öald pläace pulls powerful strong. And t'äun't only Mus' Rowfold wot's asking it fur me. Dere's odder folkse wot's asking it fur me—asking fur me and fur wot Oi've done. Dere's wickedness working still at Loats—my wickedness working wud odder folkse wickedness—and 'tis asking de pläace fur me."

A shudder went through Lucinda—she felt as if she were in the grip of a nightmare, and her voice would hardly come.

"Don't go, Dickory—don't go. Pray—you remember that prayer?—Lighten our darkness—say it for Mus' Rowfold, say it for yourself, say it for me, say it for—for——" She searched desperately for the name, screaming it out when she found it as one screams the word that wakes one out of a dream:

"Harry Cobsale!"

She was awake—sitting up on the ground, between the shafts of the old wagon, and blinking in terror at the figure in the doorway.

"What on earth's the matter? Why on earth are you sitting there, shouting for Harry Cobsale?"

Dickory had changed into his grotesque impersonator. Had Humfrey Malpas been there the whole time?

"I do believe," he continued, "that you were asleep. Ha! Ha! That's good. Think of that, you kids. She didn't get up till two hours later than I did, but she's so sleepy after her late night that she's been asleep all the time we've been away. Well, are you awake enough to come outside and do Moll Kemp saying a false farewell to Dickory, and then a shot of her handing him over to the Bow Street Runner?"

III

JESS MARLOTT

THE sun had just begun to shine when Jess Marlott floundered out of the chicken field. If only it had shone earlier, she would have escaped that nightmare struggle in the snow. She had had to do all the chicken work alone this morning—Greg was, of course, quite unable to help her—and even Jess was inclined to feel injured by this gratuitous addition to a burden which was of itself sufficiently overwhelming.

The snow, which the day before she had almost longed for, had seemed a final mockery on the part of nature as she forced herself out of bed, weary with sleeplessness and pounding memory. At first she had thought that it must soon clear or turn to rain, but it had fallen for two determined hours, indeed for the whole course of her labours. And now its melting would find out every leak in every roof at Honeypools, involving more expenses, more bills. . . . Really she must not die without having the roofs repaired—their own roof and the roofs of the brooder-house, the store-house and the hen-houses—though how this was to be managed she did not know. As soon as she was in the kitchen she took her note-book out of the table-drawer and wrote:

“See that all roofs are water-tight—tar might do for some.”

Then she went into the bedroom and had another look at Greg. He was still asleep, still snoring heavily in that gross, abandoned way which was so unlike him. Poor Greg! He would feel terrible when he woke up; he would have a ghastly headache. She had better see that the kettle was on the boil, so that he could have a cup of tea immediately on waking. She could do with a cup of tea herself; she too had a headache, a splitting headache—due no doubt to a sleepless night. She had been unable to sleep on account of his snoring, and

also on account of the still worse noise her thoughts had made, clamouring first of yesterday, then of to-morrow. Ironically enough, her pain had not visited her at all; she had seldom had a night so free of it.

She lit the oil stove and sat down beside it, watching the blue ring of flame. Once more her mind began to move backwards and forwards over yesterday's events. It had been tranquil while her body moved, while she was struggling with the chicken in the snow; but now that her body was tired and forced to rest, up jumped her mind and began to tramp up and down, an armed sentry at the forbidden gate of rest. . . . Oh, when, she wondered, would she ever sleep again?

Luckily she had had a good sleep yesterday afternoon—a better sleep than usual. She had felt so sure of the next hour or two that she had been able to relax. Even without his stealthy movements in the bedroom she would have known that Greg was dressing to go to see Brenda, and she did not expect him back for at least an hour after he had started. She had better not think of him during that hour. All that she had to concern herself with was his return, when he would be in need of all her love and strength. He would no doubt come back to her a broken man, his hope killed and his love dying; but she would be there to comfort him and help him. The dread of his solitary despair was lifted from her heart. So when she heard him go out of the house her eyelids fell. She slept, secure and sheltered in the small nest of an hour.

Later on, when she had been awake some time and he was not back, she began to imagine all sorts of things. She wondered if Brenda, in cowardice or in kindness, had carried her deception a shade further and allowed him to sit with her and make love to her again. It seemed incredible—but no more incredible than that letter she had written. . . . If it was so, Jess had everything still to do—everything and more. . . . Her heart sank, then rose on the idea that his disillusion might have made him ashamed to come home—sinking again on the question: where had he gone instead? She suddenly thought of suicide, and her skin crept; then of murder—women had been throttled for less—and her stomach heaved.

When the clock struck seven she decided that she could endure her

anxiety no longer, and putting on her gum-boots and her fur coat, she walked up the lane to the Old Parsonage—remembering herself walking there on a rainy night nearly three months ago. The drive was in darkness; this time no light came from the house, and when she put her face against the window, through which that other night she had seen Greg drinking whisky and staring fatuously at Brenda, she saw nothing but an empty room. They must have gone out. . . . Then where was Greg? She told herself she was a fool, but she felt she must do something to close all those dark lanes of conjecture up which her mind kept dashing towards some final tragedy.

She rang the bell, but nobody answered. She rang again, and again the silence closed round the small, ghostly sound. Then as she was turning away she saw a light in one of the attics; there must be somebody in the house—a servant probably, who wouldn't trouble to answer the bell (she had heard that Mrs. Light kept a very disagreeable old cook). So that was what had happened—they had gone out to dinner. But Greg could not have gone with them. . . . It was impossible. Where was he, then? Her mind bolted up one dark lane and then another as she walked miserably towards the gate.

Out in the road she nearly ran into Mrs. Malpas, who, to her embarrassment, greeted her effusively.

"Hullo, Mrs. Marlott. How nice to meet you! It seems ages since I've seen anything of you. How are you, these days?"

"Oh, quite well, thank you," said Jess.

"And your husband?"

"Quite well, thank you. I—I've just come out to meet him now." She did not want Mrs. Malpas to know that she had lost Greg, but she dared not miss the chance of finding out if she had seen him at all that evening. "Church is just over, isn't it?"

The thought that Greg, overcome with misery, might have crept into the church, had entered her mind at that very moment.

"Yes," said Mrs. Malpas. "I've left Hugo counting the money. But I don't think your husband was there. In fact I know he wasn't, because I counted the congregation and there were only twelve people, so I couldn't have missed him."

"Oh, I daresay he didn't go, then. He only said he might."

She blushed, and wondered if Mrs. Malpas had seen her coming out of the Parsonage gate.

"It seems such a pity," said the Rector's wife, "that the village people don't come to the carol service. We're always changing the time to make it more convenient for them. I thought perhaps half-past six would be an improvement, but we had fewer this year than ever. I can't think why, as nearly everyone in Woodhorn has their Christmas dinner in the middle of the day."

"Of course," Jess murmured vaguely, wondering what she should do next. She decided to go home. Perhaps Greg was already there.

"I'd better be getting back," she said. "As my husband wasn't in church he probably went for a walk and may not come home this way at all. Good night."

"Good night. And a Merry Christmas—though there isn't much left of it."

"Oh, thank you—same to you."

She hurried away, wondering if Mrs. Malpas had guessed anything. On the whole, she thought that she hadn't . . . but an hour later she knew that she had. A note came down from the Rectory, brought by May Beeney, the little maid.

"DEAR MRS. MARLOTT,

This is just to tell you that your husband is at the Plough Inn. My maid's fiancé, who brought her home, saw him there at half-past five and again through the door when he was walking past with May. I thought you might be anxious about him, so send you this—just to let you know he is all right.

With best wishes for the New Year,

Yours sincerely,

EILEEN MALPAS."

Jess scarcely knew if she felt more relieved or humiliated. Of course it was relief, infinite, swelling relief, to know that Greg had come to no harm, that he had done none of the things her imagination

had been frightening her with for the last four hours. On the other hand it was dreadful to have Mrs. Malpas writing to her like this. She had meant it kindly, of course, but the letter showed what she must have been thinking—and how she must have been talking . . . to her maid, to her maid's young man, and through him to all the village.

Not that that really mattered. The village was bound to know from other sources that Greg Marlott had been drinking at the Plough—drinking for hours, apparently. . . . For the first time her relief was punctured by anxiety on Greg's behalf. He was not used to drink; only very occasionally of late had he indulged in half a pint of bottled beer with his dinner, and she did not think that he had ever before called at the Plough. Of course it was the shock of his interview with Brenda that had driven him there—and not to church, as she had once thought possible. He was going through the orthodox process of drowning his sorrows. Poor old Greg. . . .

She wondered if she should go and fetch him home. . . . No, perhaps not. It might only make matters worse. If he was all right—merely sitting there and drinking no more than was good for him—her arrival would be a useless embarrassment and humiliation (and Jess had just learned what it was to be humiliated with the best intentions); if, on the contrary, he was all wrong, he would probably refuse to come with her—he might make a scene in the bar and add to his disgrace. Besides, it was already nine o'clock. If she went now she would not arrive much before closing-time. Better leave him to come home by himself.

He came, or rather he was brought. She guessed what it was directly the car stopped. Somebody had given him a lift home—out of friendliness or of necessity? She would not go to see—she would not appear to be anxiously awaiting him. She must preserve some rags of self-respect to cover them both. So, pale and sweating, she waited for the bell to ring before she opened the door.

Outside she found what looked like the corpse of Greg supported by two men. They were inclined to be jocular, or rather, perhaps, to carry off an awkward situation with jocularly.

"Here he is, missus. We've brought him home, and he isn't as bad as he looks."

She recognized one of the men as Sharman of Limbo Farm; the other was a stranger.

"Oh, thank you—— Oh. . . ." She could not speak or pretend any more.

"Shall we take him through for you?" asked Sharman. "He might be a bit of a job for you alone."

"Yes, please—through there," pointing to the bedroom door. As they dragged Greg across the kitchen he was violently sick.

"There," said the other man, "he'll be better after that."

They took him into the bedroom and laid him on the bed.

"He'll be all right to-morrow morning," said Sharman heartily. "Don't you worry about him, missus."

"No, I won't—and I'm very much obliged to you for bringing him home." Then feeling she must say something to excuse poor Greg: "He's not accustomed to drinking."

"No, mum—that's plain enough."

"This is the first time, I think, that he's ever been to the Plough."

"Certainly I äun't never seen him there before."

"He—he's had some bad news."

She wondered if she should have said that, but it seemed necessary to account in some way for Greg's delinquency. Both the men nodded sympathetically.

"Oh, we äun't criticizing him, mum. It's a thing that could happen to any of us."

Sharman added:

"Would you like us to undress him for you? We've taken off his boots."

"Oh, no, thanks very much—I can manage quite well now." She was grateful to them for their tolerance and their kindness, but she desperately wanted them to go.

"Very well, then. Good night, mum."

"Good night, and thank you again—ever so much."

They were gone, and she was alone—for Greg did not count as

anybody now. She went into the bedroom and looked at him, as he lay there on his back—asleep—snoring. . . . The men had taken off his boots, but they had not taken off his coat and trousers. She wondered if he would wake if she undressed him. It would be a difficult job, and perhaps she had been unwise to refuse Sharman's offer, but she had wanted so desperately to get rid of him. . . . She had better see what she could do; he would be much more comfortable if only she could get him into his pyjamas.

So she had taken off his coat, and as he did not wake, she had gone on with the job and finished it. He had slept through it all. Only once she had thought he was waking, for his eyes suddenly opened and he murmured something she could not catch. But the next minute he was off again—sleeping and snoring. He was nobody again, and she had undressed and climbed into bed and lain awake all night beside nobody.

A sound of stirring in the next room broke up her thoughts. She listened intently to the rustle of the bedclothes. Then a deep groan announced that Greg once more was somebody.

She hurried in and saw him sitting up in bed, his hand to his forehead, his face grey.

"My poor darling . . ."

He looked at her without a word.

"My poor sweetheart . . ."

She went to him and put her arms round him; but he pushed her away.

"Don't," he said quite angrily. "Don't touch me."

She was not offended, because she knew what he must be suffering.

"I'll go and make you some tea. The kettle's just on the boil."

"Don't," he said again; then: "I don't want you to do anything for me except leave me alone."

He lay down again, pulling the bedclothes over his head, and she went back into the kitchen to make the tea. He would think differently when he saw the cup in her hand. Poor Greg! She must make him understand that she was not judging him or blaming him. No doubt

on the top of all his physical ills he was utterly ashamed of himself; and then, under everything and worse than everything, must be his memory of that dreadful scene with Brenda—the scene that had driven him to find an anæsthetic at the Plough. She must manage somehow to persuade him to tell her about it, so that she could speak freely again and give freely . . . she longed for his head on her breast.

But she must proceed with caution, both on account of his present mood and of her past complicity with Brenda. As soon as the tea was made she took it into the bedroom, saying cheerfully:

“Do try and drink this, darling. It’ll make you feel ever so much better.”

He had been lying under the bedclothes, but at her words he started up and glared at her.

“Take it away.”

She was startled by the rage in his voice and eyes. Then a jumbled memory came, suggesting that she had mocked him with a makeshift remedy.

“Would you rather have a glass of ale? I can easily run up to the village and fetch some if——”

“Oh, go to hell!”

A kind of stiffness came to her. He was behaving a little too badly.

“Please don’t speak to me like that.”

“I don’t want to speak to you at all. I don’t want to speak to you or see you ever again.”

Her heart thumped painfully as she turned away. She had not been prepared for this strange anger and hatred . . . they were unlike him. Well, perhaps they were not such a surprising reaction from all he had been through. If only she knew what he had been through. . . . But in his present mood he would not tell her and she would not try any more to make him.

Perhaps it was selfish of her to want so much to comfort him, to think so much of his head on her breast. She must let him struggle out of things his own way—for the present, anyhow. Later on, when his wound was less inflamed, she might be able to salve it. But it was

selfish to badger him now. She went back into the kitchen and drank the tea herself.

It was after twelve—in no time she would have to go out and see to the chicken again. She had better start preparing the dinner first. Yesterday's roast fowl was to make a stew, and she put it into a saucepan ready for warming up with some vegetable left-overs. Then there were the potatoes to peel—she ought to start that at once, so that they could be cooking while she was out. As she fetched them from the larder she felt a small crepitation of pain—she had better sit down quietly to work and perhaps it would come to nothing. It sometimes did if she took things easily.

She sat down at the kitchen table, determined to fill her mind with simple practical thoughts. If she did not let it help the pain with its fears and suggestions, then all might yet be well. She must think of what she could give Greg for dinner. Of course he might eat the chicken, but she did not think he would, and there was nothing in the way of pudding except a little piece left of the Christmas pudding they had had yesterday. What about a baked custard? She had enough milk for a small one. He did not care as a rule for baked custard, but with his stomach in its present state he might feel differently disposed.

With thoughts of pudding and potato she tried to protect both her mind and her body against the dragons that would have eaten them. The effort was so great and absorbed so much of her attention that at first she did not notice the sounds in the next room. It was not till they culminated in the pushing open of the door that she started and looked up.

Greg stood in the doorway, wearing his shabby old dressing-gown. In it he seemed to look more grey than ever. The hair on his head stood up in grey tufts, and the hand that clutched the dressing-gown about his middle was grey, with knotted, swelling veins—an old man's hand. . . .

"Hullo, dear," she said. "Come for your tea?"

"No—put that down," as she raised the stewing tea-pot. "I don't want any tea. I want to talk to you."

He sat down opposite to her, and she thought his face looked queer—excited and strained, with the eyes full of a snapping, roving light.

"I suppose," he said, "that you think I'm mud after the way I came home last night."

So it was shame that had changed him towards her.

"Of course I don't, dear," she cried eagerly. "How could I? I know that you're one of the most abstemious men in the world, so I guessed at once that something must have happened to make you do a thing like that. That's what worried me most—wondering what had happened."

He looked at her for a moment without speaking. Then he said:

"You knew all right."

"I knew? How could I know?"

"Because she told you."

Jess stared at him. What did he mean?

"Oh, don't try to pretend any more," he cried, "that game's up. I know quite well she came round and told you I'd found out all about you and her—how you meet together behind my back and talk about me and laugh at me. I bet she came round last night, and you had another gossip and another laugh."

He himself laughed, in a way that made Jess fear he was going mad. Her mind was in confusion, but one thing stood out of it and that was that he had somehow found out about her visits to Brenda. Desperately and clumsily, she lied.

"It isn't true. I've never spoken to her in my life. I won't pretend not to understand you—you think I know Mrs. Light and have been discussing you with her. But it isn't true. I've never spoken to her, and she's never, never, been round here—last night or any other night. Whoever's told you that has been trying to make mischief."

"No one told me but herself. She told me—*she*, with her own mouth; so you needn't waste any more breath telling lies. I saw her yesterday afternoon, and she told me that you came to see her months ago, to beg her to give me up; and since then you've been again and again. You've had tea together—discussing me and my feelings. . . ."

He threw back his head and gasped: "You put your heads together and thought of the best way for her to turn me down . . ."

"Greg, it isn't true."

She repeated her lie without much conviction, for her mind was sick with the wound of Brenda's treachery. She had long admitted her to be dishonest, but she had never expected this—this rank betrayal. . . . In all her cares for the future she had never imagined such a breach of confidence. And now she did not know what to do. All her hopes from his disillusion were frustrated, because she knew that in his eyes her guilt was as deep as Brenda's. She could not help him or comfort him, for he hated her too much. She had done a thing he would never forgive. Moreover, she was lying to him—emptily and uselessly, for of course he could not possibly believe her after what Brenda had told him. She was only piling up her guilt.

"Listen to me, Greg," she pleaded, "and I'll tell you exactly how it happened."

"Then you admit it did happen."

"I'll admit that I've been to see her twice."

"Only twice? She told me three times."

"The third time was by accident. She met me in Potcommon, and because I looked so ill she asked me to have some tea with her. That was all."

"It wasn't all. For one thing I don't believe you've only met three times——"

"Greg, I swear it."

"I don't care what you swear. You lied to me at the start, so I've no reason whatever to believe you aren't lying now. I don't believe you've only met three times; and anyway that isn't the point. The point is that you and she have been plotting against me. You went to her first to persuade her to give me up, and since then you've been meeting to discuss me—you've been telling her about me, showing her my weak points, so that she could attack them and get rid of me that way. You—you've encouraged her to despise me and deceive me."

"I haven't! I haven't! How can you imagine such things?" She

saw him lying in bed, building up her infamy out of his sick stomach and aching head, working himself into a frenzy against her. "I've been perfectly loyal. All I did was because I loved you."

He laughed again—that terrible, cackling laugh.

"Oh, yes, you loved me. In other words, you wanted to keep me. So you went and begged the woman I loved to get rid of me. You took away the only thing that made my life worth living. Oh, there's no doubt of it—you must love me a lot."

He stood up suddenly, towering over her like a clumsy wraith with his grey face and grey dressing-gown.

"Greg, I loved you and she didn't."

"But she allowed me to love her. She was perfectly willing that I should come and sit with her and talk to her every day; until you went—you—you—and stopped it all. I know I hadn't got everything I wanted, but at least I had something, and you robbed me of the little I had."

"Greg, listen to me. I——"

"No, you listen to me. You went to her and made her stop seeing me, but you couldn't make me stop loving her. So you went again and you plotted and schemed and double-crossed me until now at last you've made me do even that. I don't love her any more, but you mustn't think because of that I shall ever love you again. No, no. I hate you. You've messed and spoiled the loveliest thing in my life—the only lovely thing in my life—and I hate you."

Despair froze her into a sudden dignity.

"Please don't exaggerate. You've got an entirely wrong idea of the situation. If you've found out that she's not worth loving, you mustn't blame me for it. It wasn't my fault if she double-crossed you, as you call it. I tried to persuade her not to write that letter——"

Something suddenly flashed into his eyes that frightened her.

"Hold your tongue!"

She saw that his hands were clenched in the too-long sleeves of his dressing-gown. He stood gazing down at her with that extraordinary look in his eyes. Her spirit failed.

"Greg, don't look at me like that."

She made a movement to rise, but he seized her shoulders and forced her back into her seat.

"Stay where you are. I haven't done with you yet."

"Let me go at once. I can't talk to you while you're like this."

Looking into his face was like looking into the face of a stranger. She would have been pleased to see him turn back into the nobody he had been last night.

"Greg, you're not well. Please go back to bed and rest. We—we can talk about these things afterwards, when you're feeling better."

She made another attempt to rise, but he was pressing down on her shoulders with his full weight. A sort of panic seized her.

"Let me go—let me go."

As she struggled, his grip tightened. His fingers kneaded and dug into her flesh. Then she lost her head and began to scream.

"Stop that!" he shouted.

But she could not stop. Hours, days, weeks of anxiety, sleeplessness, grief, pain and fear had found a voice at last.

"Stop it, I say!"

He shook her, but still she screamed. He put his hand over her mouth, but she screamed on. She did not struggle any more—just sat there screaming into his face. She wanted to stop, but she was unable. She knew that her screams were driving away the last of his failing sanity and self-command, but she could still hear herself screaming. It was as if a stranger had taken possession of her and was screaming out of her mouth—screaming into the face of that other stranger who was holding her and shaking her and hitting her to make her stop.

If I don't stop screaming Greg will kill me. . . .

But she could not stop.

IV

LUCINDA LIGHT

It was nearly one o'clock when the Antiquarian Artists packed up their properties in an old perambulator and started for home. The enterprise was held to have succeeded, and Humfrey was already deep in argument with his sisters over the World Première, which was to take place at the Rectory as soon as the film had been developed at Farable's Stores.

"What we must do," he said, "is to have a narrator, who will stand at the side of the screen and fill in the gaps between the shots."

"Yes—and you be the narrator, of course. It might be more public spirited to follow each shot with a piece of ordinary acting, so that everyone could have a chance."

"That's a much better idea," said Leonora. "It would explain the action just as well and be a most unusual combination of two different techniques."

"But we could never manage the lighting. The film would have to be in darkness and the ordinary stage in light, which means that we should always have to be lighting and putting out the lamps. It isn't as if we had electricity, you see."

"We could use daylight: show the film in the afternoon and simply draw back the curtains for the acting."

"Or we could show the film in the dining-room and have the acting in the study, and the audience move from one room to the other. It would be a nice change for them."

"A very nice change, you silly little girl. You really do think of the most imbecile things."

"Well, people do get tired of sitting in one place and they'll be sitting there all night if you're narrator. Once you're on the stage, I know, you'll never come off."

Were the Malpases quarrelling? Lucinda asked herself the usual question, but was too deep in her own thoughts to take more than an academic interest in it. She was wondering if she should call in at Loats on her way home. She would like to see Joan Cobsale and satisfy her anxiety about the place. She might understand things better if she had a talk with Joan. On the other hand, she would be late for lunch at home, and Mrs. Shafto might make trouble about it.

What should she do? They had come to the fringes of Harbolets Shaw, and the spindle-shadow of the trees was drawing a skeleton wood on the melting snow. She looked towards the gate and then suddenly checked her walk. There was a cloud among the bones of the trees, a form among their forms, merging with them and yet almost overwhelmingly apart. Dickory stood among the chestnut stoles by the gate. She could not see him very distinctly—he had a transparency through which the bare boughs showed their design—but she could see his anguished, beseeching gaze, and immediately made up her mind. She would go—she must go—to Loats.

She was just going to announce her decision when a loud screech from Petronilla startled them all.

"Look! Who's that man?"

"What man? There's nobody there," said Humfrey.

"There's nobody there, you silly fool," said Leonora.

"Yes, there is," said Nigel. "Just there. . . . No, he's gone."

"I don't see anybody," said Lucinda—quite truthfully, for Dickory had vanished.

"There isn't anybody," said Humfrey. "It's just the sun among the trees."

"What rot!" cried Petronilla. "As if the sun among the trees could look like a man! I saw him and Nigel saw him; either there's a man there or a ghost."

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Humfrey. "I expect it's Dickory."

"Well, why not? You've told us hundreds of times that he haunts this lane."

"Did he look like a highwayman?"

"Not in the least—he looked more like a tramp."

"Then he can't be Dickory. Perhaps he *is* a tramp."

"I thought he was the sun among the trees. Anyway, I'm sure he isn't a tramp—no human being could vanish as suddenly as that. He's a ghost, I tell you. I always thought I was psychic. Where are you going, Lucinda?"

"To see Joan at the farm."

"But it's just on dinner-time."

"They have their dinner at half-past twelve. She'll have finished now."

"Well, look out for the tramp," said Humfrey.

"Look out for the ghost," said Petronilla.

"Look out for the sun among the trees," mocked Leonora.

Their voices were already dying away, she walked so fast.

There was an urgency upon her now. She felt that she must get to Loats as quickly as possible—before something happened . . . Dickory had warned her. She was convinced that she had just seen him definitely as a ghost—as a spirit come from the dead to warn the living. Hitherto their meetings had been in his world rather than hers; she did not think that he ever had spoken to her across death. He had been no more dead than she—merely a fugitive, hiding for his life in a country that was gone, but which by some strange freak or fissure in her nature she had been able to visit. Now he was a ghost, haunting Ember Lane and seen by her (and by Petronilla and Nigel) as he had been seen by the Rectory gardener's father.

She could not believe that he had appeared like that for no reason. Surely he had meant to urge her to go to Loats, where the evil that he had done lay waiting for the evil that others might do—the murder of Mus' Rowfold for the murder of Richard Cobsale. . . . She ran. She ran out of the wood, into the great green and white field, all messed and streaky with the melting snow. Below her on the side of

the hill was the pippin-glow of Loats, a rosy city, with blocks of stacks and streets of barns. As she ran towards it she noticed how much thatch there was among the glowing brick. And where was the black Victorian oast that rose above it all like a steeple? She could see only the two little red kilns.

She still ran, but her breath was caught with a new terror. Something had happened. She was in the Old Country again, dropped into it suddenly as into a prison, just when she wanted most desperately to work her will in the present day. What could she do? How could she escape? She was powerless to help Harry Cobsale with the bars of two hundred years between them. Yet she did not feel that she had in herself any power to break those bars. Always hitherto the times had changed without any act or wish on her part; the Old Country had voluntarily assumed her and voluntarily released her, and she knew no way of compelling it.

She came into the yard and looked about her in some confusion. It was full of men and buildings. There were two cottages at least, besides what was in modern times the cake-house, and a number of lodges that she could not identify. Half a dozen men and women were clattering about with forks and pails. The women wore pattens and looped up gowns, the men wore round frocks; and they talked and joked with one another in a rough speech she could not understand. None of them seemed to be aware of her, which was a relief in many ways, though no help in her present difficulties. If she could have spoken to them she could at least have asked for Dickory, who might have been able to act as interpreter between this world and the one she sought. But she knew from her memories of the Chequers Inn that it would be useless to speak to anyone, and as she felt vaguely afraid of these inhabitants of another time she avoided them as widely as she could.

Uncertain what to do next, she walked towards the house, which looked very red and new, with a peach neatly trained round the door. The gable-end, to which her eyes unwillingly travelled, looked older than the rest, but also very trim, with gay curtains in the window which she had always seen as a blind eye. As she gazed up at it,

somebody parted the curtains and looked out. It was an elderly man, with grizzled hair and beard and she felt such a dread of him that she wondered if she was indeed looking at what Dickory had so dreaded—Mus' Rowfold's ghost. But the next moment he called to somebody in the yard (she realized that this time she was hearing as well as seeing) that he was coming down.

She turned away, feeling for some reason that she could not bear to see him come out of the door, and as she did so caught sight of a man disappearing round the corner of the cottage that should normally have been the cake-house. The glimpse, short as it was, had been enough to show her Dickory—Dickory carrying a gun. At once her fear solidified. She knew now what it was that she dreaded so inexpressibly. She had arrived just in time to see the whole tragedy start—to see Dickory shoot Mus' Rowfold, and all the dreary tale of his crime, suffering and betrayal begin its course down the repeating ages.

To see him . . . or could she prevent him? Can one change the past as one can change the future by an act of the will? Interfere in it from outside? . . . She did not linger over the question, for it seemed remote from the necessity of the present minute. That necessity was to act at once. She could hear the house door opening behind her and Mus' Rowfold coming out into the yard. In a minute he would be walking past the corner where Dickory lurked with his gun.

"Dickory! Stop!" she cried as she flung herself round it, knocking her head violently against some obstruction she couldn't see.

A sharp pain seemed to swing her head back, and for a moment everything swam in a gathering mist. Through it she could see Dickory crouching against the wall with his gun at the cock. But between her and him was some invisible obstruction, something hard and wooden which she could feel but could not see. Oh, what was happening? . . . and all the time she could hear Mus' Rowfold's footsteps drawing nearer. Soon he would have reached the fatal spot.

What could she do? She would have somehow to get round whatever it was that stood invisibly in her way. Dickory! . . . but he had already seen her. He could see her just as she could see him, in spite of the thing between them. She watched his mouth open in a desperate

almost grotesque expression of fear. Then suddenly with a loud scream he dropped his gun and ran—just as the door of one of the lodges shut safely behind Mus' Rowfold.

She staggered a few more steps, hit the obstacle again, and fell down.

HARRY COBSALE

WHEN Harry came out of the Ring of Bells at Rushmonden, the snow was half melted. The sun had been shining for more than an hour, and already the landscape was streaky; soon there would be no whiteness left, save where the shadows lay. The roads were soiled with wheel tracks, and the woods shone with a purple light as their wet thickets caught the sun.

He walked briskly. He felt revived, partly by his drinks, and partly by something more indeterminate. In his heart were dregs of satisfaction he could not quite account for . . . they surely could not have been left by his conversation with Lucinda Light. That had made him feel bad in many ways . . . and yet his memory seemed to hold something comforting—perhaps he had better not examine it too closely.

As he passed the Ironlatch House he looked round to see if Lucinda and her friends were in view; but there was no sight of them, nor could he hear any voices. She was a queer girl, but he had liked her this time in spite of her queerness; and he saw that she had in her many of the qualities that he admired in Joan—that he desired in Joan . . . beauty, sweetness, fineness, goodness, all the things that he had run away from to Nan Scallow, because he had wanted them so much. . . .

If he liked, no doubt he could know her better. She was always friendly, and she often came to Loats to see Joan. Her mother did not seem to have any stuck-up ideas about her friends (nor, indeed, was she entitled to any, considering all that was said about her). If he managed properly they might be dancing together at a hotel some day—at Easter, perhaps. His mind once more showed him a picture of Mr. Harry Cobsale, newly shaved and wearing his tail suit, looking very much of a fellow as he danced with Miss Lucinda Light in a blue and

silver dress. . . . It was blue this time—he thought she would nice in blue.

As he entered Harbolets Shaw, the wind—returned to the south—brought him one o'clock on Woodhorn chimes. The shaw was full of its own music—the tinkle and plop of melting snow as it spattered in drops on the undergrowth or slid in masses from the forks of the trees. The whole place seemed to be in motion—the sunshine glittered with flying drops and behind the tossing heads of the trees the sky hurried and changed. A warmer, clearer, brighter day was being blown in after the snow. Already Harry seemed to smell the sap in his hedges, the new grass in his fields.

He was actually beginning to feel hungry, and thought favourably of the cold goose he'd been too miserable to enjoy yesterday. Of course Richard would be there . . . his heart checked his appetite with an angry thump. What was he going to do about Richard? He no longer meant to use his gun. He'd stop short of that, just as he'd stopped short at two drinks this morning. But did his honour still demand that he should knock him down?

Exactly how much had he promised Lucinda Light? Very little—only to take care. But how pleased she would be and how fine he would feel if to-morrow he could go up to her and say: "My brother owes you a whole skin. He's a dirty tick, but after what you said I decided to let him alone." He saw himself going up to her, feeling all that much nearer to dancing with her at a hotel.

What a terrification she'd been in. You'd think she knew something other people didn't know. She thought she did, anyway—she had said as much. She was queer, of course—queer, but attractive in her own way, which was so different from the way of other girls. He laughed at himself. You'd think he was falling for her. But he wasn't doing that—she was too tall. . . .

He had come into the yard and saw that the snow had melted off the great midden that stood before the gate. It had already cut out a number of channels through the foothills of manure and rotted straw that lay between the gutters and its central peak. The gutters sang with the streams that had reached them. Inside the yard gate Harry

stood still, staring at the midden heap as it smoked in the winter sun.

On the slope of it, tossed derelict, like a flower thrown down to die, lay a work-basket lined with pale blue satin. Damp and dung had riddled its dainty integrity, one side was burst by the violence with which it had been flung, and a little snow still lay under the shadow of the half-open lid.

As he stared at it Harry felt triumph and satisfaction drain away. He forgot all about Lucinda Light, and the plans he had half made. His rage at this his brother's latest effort to crush and humiliate him met his pity for Joan, his fellow victim, as fire meets water, making a steam which felt as if it must burst his heart.

Poor little Missus! He saw her with his present in her arms, he saw Richard tearing it away and throwing it on the dung-hill. It must have happened last night, when they came back from Waxend. He knew that the work-basket had not been on the midden earlier yesterday. She had probably managed to get hold of it after the row and hide it in her bedroom—it had certainly disappeared from the kitchen. Then Richard had found it and taken it from her . . . he did not care how much she suffered as long as he could humble and hurt his brother. For a moment Harry scarcely knew which hurt him most, her pain or his.

Then suddenly he saw her standing on the other side of the dung-hill. His heart jumped. He could have sworn she was not there when he came into the yard. He wondered if she had seen him. She stood there wrapped to the eyes in her fur-collared coat, above which the cold had made her fluffy hair stand out like the pathetic feathers on the head of a fledgling bird. Poor kid! No doubt she had come to gaze at her spoilt treasure, perhaps to see if there was a hope of retrieving it.

"Joan," he called gently. "Joan . . ."

She looked straight at him across the smoking dung-hill.

"Please don't speak to me."

He had not expected her voice to be so grim. But the next minute he thought: the poor little thing's afraid of Richard.

He said:

"You must let me say I'm sorry."

"I'm glad to hear it. And now I hope you'll go right away."

He stared at her.

"Richard's made you a generous offer," she said, "and if you've any regard for me, you'll take it."

He suddenly realized what she was talking about.

"You mean you want me to clear out of Loats?"

"Yes, I do. After the way you behaved yesterday and to-day, we've all had about as much as we can stand. Even your mother and Daisy are fed up with you."

Harry flushed as her little arrows pierced him one by one.

"Joan—you haven't turned against me?"

"Against you? I never was for you. I'm Richard's wife."

"But yesterday you wanted us to be friends."

"I wanted us all to be friendly—not specially you and me. And I thought you were going to help me pull it off. Instead of which you went and mucked things up even worse than ever. I see now that you were only being nice to me to spite Richard—to hurt him through me. And I tell you straight that you're not going to get away with that."

"But it's not true. I like you, Joan, for yourself. I've always liked you—more than I should, perhaps."

"That's not the way to talk."

He began to feel impatient with her.

"You get me wrong every way. I only mean that it might have been better for me if I hadn't liked you so much. And for you too. I'm afraid you had a terrible time yesterday, but it wasn't all my fault, neither."

"Whose was it, then?"

"Well, Richard seems to have done what he could to make you miserable."

"Richard only did what he thought proper. And he was right. No good could come of my being friendly with you. I didn't see it at the time, as I didn't know you as well as he does, so he was right to

take the line he did, until you yourself showed me plainly what you're like."

Harry wished he had not spoken to her. He wished he had gone and plugged Richard's rump with shot. He'd go now—he wouldn't waste any more time on her or any more pity. But she would not let him go. Like a little fury she barred his way.

"Listen to me, Harry Cobsale. You've made me speak to you, though I vowed I never would again. I've begun, so I may as well go on. I shan't say anything that Richard wouldn't approve of. He's my husband—and I love him. Get that. I love him and I'm not going to join sides with anybody who hates him. You're making a very big mistake if you think you can turn me against him or get at him through me. I love him, I tell you. There may be things about the life here that I don't like, but I'd rather put up with them than try to change them against his will. So please don't talk to me again. And oh how I wish you'd take the money he's offered you and clear out. You'll be a fool if you don't. It's a good offer—a chance for you to set up your own place and live your own life without making other people miserable. I believe that if you went Mother and Daisy would come round and be decent to Richard. It's you who's keeping the family apart and I wish you'd go."

He said bitterly:

"You've changed since yesterday morning."

"A great deal has happened since then."

"Yes," said Harry, looking at the midden. "Yesterday morning you liked my present—you were pleased with it. Now you don't seem to care that Richard's chucked it on the dung-hill."

"Richard didn't chuck it there," said Joan. "I did."

"Oh . . ." said Harry.

"Yes, I hate the very sight of the beastly thing. It reminds me of you and everything I want to forget."

"You did it to please Richard."

"And to please myself. He didn't ask me."

Harry looked at her, trying to find something flippant to say. But it would not come. She still barred his way to the house, so he turned

round and went out through the gate he had come in at ten minutes ago. He did not care where he went as long as he got away from her, the little spitfire. His head sang—as if she had boxed his ears.

He went up and stood in the meadow above the farm, looking over to Rushmonden and the Kentish hill-side peeling in colours out of the snow. One thing had happened to him as the result of the last ten minutes: he wanted to get away. The best thing he could do now, the best answer he could give both Joan and Richard, was to lift his chin in the air and walk out on them, with fifteen hundred pounds of their money in his pocket. He did not want to live in the same house as Joan after this, nor did he hate Richard enough to stay for the sole pleasure of spiting him. Joan's virulence seemed in some queer way to have reduced his hatred of Richard—perhaps it was because he no longer envied him his possession of her. He still hated him, but no more than he'd hated him before she came. And the thing he wanted most was not to plug him with shot or even to knock him down—at the risk of being knocked down again himself—but to clear out. He did not care very much about his mother and Daisy after the way they'd behaved yesterday morning. . . . He felt suddenly and desperately lonely . . . he'd feel less lonely if he was alone.

For the price of Loats' hop-quota—which was not likely to fetch a penny less than three thousand pounds, or even three thousand five hundred—he could buy a farm of, say, a hundred and fifty acres, with a good house—not too near Woodhorn, nor yet too far away. He did not want to leave the country of the Kent and Sussex borders; he wanted only to get far enough to make things different. A different farm, a different village, a different pub, a different market-town, and the result no doubt would be a different Harry Cobsale.

A different Harry could take up with a different sort of girl—a better girl than Joan because better-tempered and better-bred. Lucinda Light was just as pretty as Joan and a good deal sweeter. She was incapable of saying any of the things that Joan had said to-day. Not that he thought of marrying her—in spite of the wipe it would give to Richard's eye. She wasn't really his type—too queer and too towny

and too tall. But if he went away he could meet a decent sort of girl more easily than he could here—have his pick of the yeoman-farmers' daughters, or even the daughters of professional men. . . . He could make himself a catch, if things turned out well.

In order that they should do so it was, however, necessary that he should stop rowing with Richard right away. If he knocked him down or went for him with a gun, even if he did no more than pepper him, there would be a public scandal—even, perhaps, a case in the courts—and his name would be mud everywhere.

He turned reflectively towards the farm. It must be half-past one. Richard would have finished his dinner, and he could eat his share of the cold goose without meeting him. With these new ideas of his for the future, he had better keep out of Richard's way, for the present at least. He dared not provoke himself with the sight of Richard, for fear that he might be tempted to use his gun. . . . His heart felt suddenly cold. Suppose he had shot at him and fallen unawares into the pit of murder. . . . He knew now that in his heart he had already murdered his brother, and he drew back appalled.

Never till that moment had he fully realized the depth and darkness of the gulf into which he might have fallen. Only a few hours ago he had laughed at Lucinda Light for her fears. But now he realized that she had seen further than he. She had seen where he was going and tried to stop him. Tried? . . . he was not sure that she had not succeeded. He doubted whether Joan's fury alone would have dissuaded him from his revenge. He might have wanted to see how much she'd love her husband after she'd spent an hour picking shot out of his backside. . . . No, if anyone had stopped him and not just his own common sense, it was not Joan; it was Lucinda. But for her he might now be running for his life—soon to be hiding for his life, on trial for his life, like those poor devils in the newspapers. . . .

Pfew. He shook his head with relief, as a dog shakes himself on coming out of the water. He'd tell her what had happened when he got a chance. She'd be pleased. . . .

Then suddenly he saw her standing in the yard, close to the cake-

house. He had come round the midden and was still some way off when he caught sight of her. He was surprised. He had not expected her to come to the farm to-day.

"Hullo," he called. But she did not hear him. She stood uncertainly, looking round her, with a queer, bewildered air. Then suddenly she shouted something that he did not catch, and ran straight into the lean-to door which was shut fast. She must have knocked herself badly, but in spite of that, and though he saw her stagger backwards, she turned round and ran at it again—straight into it, as before. She fell, before he could reach her.

"What on earth do you think you're doing?"

He spoke banteringly in spite of his concern, for he did not think she had done more than knock herself silly. But the next minute, as she neither spoke nor rose, he realized that she was stunned. She lay stretched out on the stones, her face the face of a dead girl.

He was terrified—lost his head—tried to raise her; then when he felt all the weight of her unconsciousness, let her sink back.

"Hi!" he called to the shut house. "Hi! Mother! Daisy! Help!"

The house was as blank and silent as her face. Was nobody coming? . . . Then her eyes opened, and met his without seeing them before they shut again.

He was intensely relieved, because for a moment in his panic he had feared her dead.

"Lucinda!" he cried, and again her eyes opened—seeing him this time.

"Oh," she murmured weakly, "my head aches."

He was taking off his coat, to slip it under her, when Daisy waddled out of the house.

"Hullo," she said. "Did you call?" Then: "Lord a' mercy! What's happened *now*?"

"She's hurt herself. Help me to get her indoors."

Mrs. Cobsale had appeared behind Daisy.

"Goodness me! She's fainted. She must have been to Honeypools."

"What are you talking about, you silly old woman?" said Harry.

He and Daisy were trying to help Lucinda to her feet. She tottered

between them, her eyes closed. They had almost to carry her to the sitting-room sofa.

Harry said:

"Somebody had better go for Doctor Sainsbury."

"I expect he's at Honeypools now," said Daisy. "I'll send one of the men for him, if they're not all there already."

"Why should they be at Honeypools? What's going on at Honeypools?"

"Going on?" cackled Mrs. Cobsale. "If you hadn't been so late for dinner you'd have heard that both Mr. and Mrs. Marlott are lying dead at Honeypools."

"Dead!"

He looked anxiously down at Lucinda's face, in case the words had reached her; but she did not seem to hear.

"Yes, dead. Bob Woodsell found them half an hour ago. He'd strangled her and shot himself. Richard's up there now."

"My God!" said Harry.

"I made sure she'd heard the news and fainted," said Mrs. Cobsale.

"She hasn't fainted. She's hit her head against the cake-house door. I'll run up to Honeypools and see if the doctor's there. I don't care how dead the Marlotts are. She's more important—he must come at once. Look after her, Daisy. I'll be back in a minute."

He was just going to leave the room when he heard Lucinda's voice.

"What's happened?"

"Nothing—you've hit your head; that's all." He went back to the couch and stooped over her. "I'm going for the doctor now. You must lie still."

"I'm all right. Are you? . . . is Richard? . . . Oh, please . . ."

"I'm all right," he said firmly. "And Richard's all right. Don't you worry about us any more. None of that's going to happen."

"Oh . . . thank you."

Harry nearly laughed.

"Don't thank me—thank yourself."

His mother and Daisy were staring at him, wondering what on

earth he was talking about. He hurried out of the room, well pleased with himself, in spite of the stress of the last five minutes. Lucinda Light would soon be well, and then he could tell her all that had happened and all that had not happened. When he thought of her he had a feeling of release, as if he had escaped from slavery. He had had his chance of hurting Richard, but he had not taken it; Nan Scallow had called him again out of the darkness, but he had not gone to her. He felt as if he had lived a part of his life over again and made a better job of it.

VI

BRENDA LIGHT—LUCINDA LIGHT—HARRY COBSALE

"CHILD," said Michael tenderly, leaning over her, "don't you think you've grieved enough?"

She answered in the hoarse unaccustomed voice of her tears:

"I shall never have grieved enough."

Nor should she. How could she?—with her struggle turned into a fresh offence, her refuge come to be merely the site of a new bonfire. She grieved for herself more than for the Marlotts. They had at least escaped out of a shameful world, and Jess by a swifter easier way than might otherwise have been hers—that much had come out at the inquest. But her mind and body sagged as she realized the end of all her high-flung thoughts, falling about her now like dead rocket sticks. She had burnt up the Marlotts.

"No, my dear," said Michael in a firmer voice, "you've grieved enough and you've punished yourself enough. It's time you turned and saw some of the blame on the other side. If you've made mistakes, other people have been fools."

She knew that he thought Greg Marlott was a fool, just as he had thought Nicky was a fool—two fools even before she had made fools of them.

"It doesn't help me to think that."

"Are you quite sure? It would help me a lot in your place."

Yes, no doubt it would. But her heart was different, and she could not turn away its reproaches even by reasoning with herself. However, he knew better than to leave her entirely to reason. As she felt his arm come in heavy, tender protection round her body, and his cheek lie warm and rough and loving against hers, reproach suddenly dissolved into surrender.

"Darling, I'll do my best."

"That's right, my lovely one; and soon you'll be feeling happier—when you're out of it all, when you've put the Atlantic Ocean between you and this damned place."

Yes, he was right; she would feel happier. She knew she would; and she would accept her happiness in the chastened spirit of a woman who knows herself to be incapable of a higher achievement. This time she had put up no opposition, erected no barriers between herself and the way of escape. That had been her mistake before—thinking she was brave enough and strong enough to wipe out all the harm she had done. Now she saw that she had barely made the attempt. Some instinct had urged her to atonement, just as it had urged her to take refuge in Woodhorn Parsonage, but it had urged her blindly, as instinct urges the Norway lemmings to swim blindly out to sea in search of an island which has been gone ten thousand years.

She would not make that mistake again. She knew now that she was inadequate. That was the operative word—inadequate. If she had been deliberately ruthless she could have done neither Nicky nor the Marlotts any more harm than she had done them merely through the failure to rise to her own occasions. She had loved Nicky and she had wanted to help Jess Marlott, yet for neither had she achieved anything less than disaster. Plainly she must in future be protected against herself; and where could she find a better, more congenial, more essentially adequate, protector than Michael? who would not tolerate for a moment what Nicky had tolerated or what she had tolerated herself.

He asked her:

"What are you thinking of? Why are you looking so sad?"

She smiled, because she knew that he hated to see her sad. He knew, of course, that she must be sad, but she did not think he knew how sad she must be. If anything, he was glad to see the machinations of her Victorian conscience brought to nought. He was too kind-hearted to triumph over her, but no doubt he held that this second tragedy had proved him right—as of course it had. If ever she thought otherwise it was because there was still so much in her mind that was

hurt and confused, that continued obstinately, as it were, to haunt Woodhorn Parsonage, ignoring the road to the west.

When he saw her smile he smiled too and offered her a cigarette.

"My poor baby—how glad I'll be when I've got you all to myself on the *Aquitania*. Yes, I can almost find it in my heart to forgive Lucinda for turning me down as a stepfather when I realize how much more we shall enjoy our honeymoon without her."

"Lucinda hasn't turned you down. It's quite sensible of her, really, to want to finish her education. After all, she's only eighteen and hasn't been to school since the autumn before last. A year at Madame Schevingen's will do her a lot of good."

"And are there no educational establishments in America? I seem to have heard of a few."

"Oh yes, but for an English girl of Lucinda's type I think a finishing school in Paris gives a better polish than an American College. She'll come out to us in a year's time and do you much more credit than she would now."

She had from the first supported Lucinda's entreaty to be left behind when they went to New York. Apart from her own reluctance to drag an unwilling daughter at her heels she felt a secret pleasure in the fact that Michael should have at least one resounding defeat. His triumph over her was lessened by his failure to win Lucinda. He had been so confident . . . and yet he had failed so utterly. . . . She had never seen Lucinda more vehement, more determined than in this matter. In spite of all that Michael had done to win her heart she would have none of him, and Brenda hoped and believed that the failure was realized. It might make him less cocksure.

Her own feelings were mixed. In one sense her daughter had taken a load off her mind, in another she had wounded her to the quick. For a year she had lived uneasily with Lucinda as her judge, and now at last that judge had pronounced sentence. By that sentence—Brenda knew it, though it had travelled no further than the court-room of Lucinda's heart—they were parted for ever. Lucinda would go her own way. They would meet again, of course, but no longer as mother and daughter. Brenda would cease to be Lucinda's mother the day she

became Michael's wife. And part of her secret humiliation was the knowledge that she would not mind very much. She loved Lucinda, but Lucinda was Nicky too. . . . It would be a relief not to have to look at him so often. . . .

"Yes," grumbled Michael, "it would be nice to have her a little less unsophisticated. But that was one reason why I wanted her out there."

"Don't you worry. The girls at Madame's are pretty tough."

"But she's spending her holidays with the Malpases."

"Only a few weeks next summer. By that time she'll probably think them as ghastly as we do."

They talked more lightly till it was time for him to go. Then, when his arms came round her in farewell, she suddenly felt her burden again.

"Michael, Michael . . . I don't deserve it."

"Deserve what?"

"To be marrying you next week. I still feel I oughtn't to be so happy."

"Ought," said he, "is an aspidistra."

"I know—but——"

"And you needn't feel so sure that you're going to be happy. You may find me a tiresome husband."

Yes, she thought to herself when he was gone, I daresay that I shall sometimes find you a very tiresome husband. You won't be trustful and tolerant like Nicky. You know what I'm like, which he never did, and you'll keep me in order, which he never tried. No more flirting, no more adventures, except with you. . . .

She sat in her white room, looking into the fire. The tears that had been in her eyes when Michael left had dried unshed. Soon it would all be gone from her—the whiteness and the fire. Someone else, probably better fitted for country life than herself, would live here and fill these large, quiet rooms with all sorts of activities, people and voices. Only the ghost of apple-blossom might sometimes speak to other ghosts of the woman who had lost here something she had never had.

The picture flickered on the screen. Blurred outlines appeared, blurred movements took place.

"It doesn't seem quite right somehow," said Mr. Malpas, his spectacles alight in the glow that came up from the Ciné Projector.

"Oh, yes, it is," Leonora whispered hoarsely. "It's only that I didn't quite know how to hold the camera."

"Silence, please," said Humfrey, standing beside the screen. "This, ladies and gentlemen, is the notorious baby-killer, Moll Kemp. We see her here with her helpless infant, whom she is about to strangle." The dark objects in the picture leaped convulsively and the screen became suddenly black. "She buries him in the garden of the Chequers Inn—a notorious hostelry, frequented by the gentlemen of the High Toby, in other words highwaymen. The most notorious, gallant and handsome of these is one Dickory." He tapped his stick on the floor, and his own image wavered on to the screen, bowing ingratiatingly right and left.

"Oh, Humfrey dear," said Mrs. Malpas, "you should have taken off your spectacles."

"I did for the other shots. One can't think of everything. Do shut up, Mother."

The entertainment proceeded. Lucinda watched it from the back of the room. Really it was very bad—very bad indeed—worse even than she had thought likely. The camera, of course, was only a toy; but it was an efficient toy within its limits. Leonora needn't have made such a bungle of it. She must have moved continually while she was taking the pictures.

"The wicked Moll Kemp," droned Humfrey, "not content with murdering her innocent child, betrays her lover Dickory to the Bow Street Runner."

On the screen he stood beside Petronilla, looking very cold in her shorts. She clapped him on the shoulder and seized his arm just as he was about to draw the Rectory bread-knife from the folds of his mackintosh cape.

Really, thought Lucinda, the pictures are better when they're not so clear. She was growing impatient for the show to end, but it

dragged on through the labyrinths of Humfrey's commentary, till at last both Moll Kemp and Dickory, the one ignobly, the other nobly, met their ends.

The Malpas family clapped its own performance with vigour.

"Very good indeed," said Mrs. Malpas. "I could recognize you all."

"I am interested to know, Humfrey," said Mr. Malpas, as he turned up the room into lamplight, "what are your authorities for this story. I know that Dickory is sometimes talked about round here, but I have found no records of him."

"It's a legend, of course," said Humfrey. "I've based my story on a legend."

"But does the legend make him out a highwayman? I can't see how a highwayman—that is a robber on horseback—could have found it worth his while to frequent a road like Ember Lane. Even in the old days there could have been only a limited traffic across the marsh, and mostly a traffic of farm-carts and farm-hands, who would scarcely have been worth robbing. Perhaps the tale is just an embroidery on the deeds of some foot-pad, who scared the country people for a while and then met his deserts."

"Oh, no, Father," said Humfrey. "He was definitely a highwayman. He wore a purple cloak and rode a black mare."

"Besides," shrilled Petronilla, "I saw him, you remember, and he was certainly dressed as a highwayman."

"I saw him too," said Nigel, "by the gate of Harbolets Shaw. But he looked like a man."

"Well, a highwayman is a man, stupid."

"Not the sort of man I saw."

"Now, children," said Mrs. Malpas firmly, "you know you mustn't say things like that. It's all very well for you to play at seeing ghosts, but when it comes to thinking you've really seen them it's quite another thing. I can't bear to hear any of you say anything that isn't quite truthful."

"But it is truthful, Mother," cried Petronilla. "I saw Dickory by the gate of Harbolets Shaw, and so did Nigel."

"And I saw them see him," said Humfrey.

"And I saw him see them see him," screeched Leonora, "and then Lucinda went into the Shaw and we all told her to beware of him. You remember, don't you, Lucinda?"

Lucinda shook her head.

"There," said Mrs. Malpas, "and Lucinda's older and wiser than any of you. You really must be careful, children, what you say."

"But it was just before Lucinda had her accident," said Humfrey, "and you never remember anything that happened just before an accident."

"Mother," cried Petronilla, "do you think Mr. Marlott will haunt Ember Lane?"

Mrs. Malpas turned crimson.

"Of course not, you naughty little girl. How dare you say such a thing?"

"Well, he has as much right to be a ghost as Dickory."

"And Mrs. Marlott," put in Leonora.

"If any of you children mentions Mr. or Mrs. Marlott again you will be severely punished. I refuse to have you make fun of a terrible tragedy."

"We're not making fun," mumbled Petronilla, but she said no more about the Marlotts. At the moment, that is to say. Later on Lucinda overheard her discussing with Humfrey the possibility of making them into a film.

"We could do it at Honeypools itself. You can get in through the kitchen window, for there's a pane broken just beside the catch."

"I don't think Mr. and Mrs. Marlott would make a film," said Leonora, "there's not a decent woman's part in it."

"There's Mrs. Light," said Petronilla. "I wouldn't mind playing her. It would make quite a good snaky siren, Lupe Velez part."

"And leave me to play Mrs. Marlott, I suppose," said Leonora. "Well, I tell you straight I'm not going to do it. And if you think that, short of carving bits off yourself, you could ever look like a snaky siren . . ."

Then they both simultaneously caught sight of Lucinda and said: "Shut up!"

Lucinda walked down Ember Lane. Moving spears of sunlight and shadow went ahead of her, as a high wind chased the clouds, a wind that seemed to shake sunshine and shade together in the same cold. She wore a thick brown tweed coat buttoned up to her chin and great crimson woolly gloves with gauntlets half-way up her arms. But her head was bare, and her hair seemed part of the moving sunshine, a golden ball floating down Ember Lane.

She was on her way to Loats Farm, to say good-bye to Joan Cobsale, for to-morrow she was leaving Woodhorn. She and Mummy were going to stay in London till the wedding, and then immediately afterwards she would leave for Paris with another girl who was going to Madame Schevingen's. Mummy and Michael (she must get used to thinking of him as Michael, for she could see that it hurt Mummy's feelings when she forgot and called him Mr. Barney) had suggested that she should travel with them on the *Aquitania* as far as Cherbourg; but she did not think they really wanted her and she certainly did not want to be with them.

She did not really want to go to the wedding, but she saw that she must. Queer as the thought might seem, she would be breaking her promise to her father if she did not go. She must go and do all the outside things, or her mother would be hurt and humiliated; but that was all she need do. She did not believe that her promise bound her to go with Mrs. Barney to New York. She would have Mr. Barney to attend her there. Her daughter was discharged.

She had done her best, and she hoped that Daddy, if he knew, would not think it all a failure—even though she had not been able either to make her mother happy or to keep her out of trouble. Michael Barney would do that much better than she had—than her father had. Another queer thought was that her father would not disapprove of the marriage. He would know that Mummy must always be looked after and spoilt by someone—some man; and here was a man who would do both well, even though he had been—was still, in fact—an

enemy. Mummy would be happy with him—incredible as it might seem, and little as Lucinda liked to think of it—and she would be safe. Any Mr. and Mrs. Marlotts there might be in the United States would also be safe. The thought consoled her.

About herself Lucinda felt less certain. She did not dislike the idea of going to school in Paris—though it had no great attraction for her, either—and she was already looking forward to her summer with the Malpases, to being back in Woodhorn and seeing her friends again, both people and places. But she was well aware that the scheme only postponed her journey to New York. She could not stay indefinitely either in Paris or at the Rectory.

Still, she was not going to worry about that now. Much can happen in a year. She knew that, because much *had* happened in a year—if it really had happened. . . . She faltered and put up her hand to her forehead. Her head still ached sometimes when she thought deeply of things.

She was nearly at Loats' gate. She could already see it standing pale against the underwood of Harbolets Shaw. She was right at the spot where she could judge for herself if she chose. She had only to climb the bank and look through the twigs of the hedge in the field above the shaw. More than once before this she had thought of putting things to the test, but had shrunk back, fearing she did not quite know what—what she should see? Or what she should not see?

This morning she felt bolder, and scrambling up the bank she hurried to the familiar place, and stooped down to look, without letting herself think. There lay the empty fields, sloping towards the distant cap of an oast-house, and beyond them spread the marsh in a sort of brittle clearness, the January floods holding the sun in their basin and Rushmonden on the farther hill standing out in the clear, clean colours of a toy village. For several minutes she stooped there, looking and waiting. Oh, would it change? She knew now that she wanted it to change. But the only change that came was the shadow of a cloud, stroking across the marsh and wiping the sunshine out of the windows of Limbo Farm, then suddenly passing and restoring the world to light.

No, it was not going to change. Why? What had she lost? She stood up, struggling with a feeling of almost bitter disappointment. Woodhorn would not be the same without her glimpses of the Old Country. She wondered painfully if they had gone for ever. It might be possible that the concussion that had laid her up for nearly a week, and of which she still felt the effects in occasional headaches, had done something to her personality, shut up the part that had sometimes looked out through a secret window. She had certainly not "seen" anything since her accident—not even the apple blossom that occasionally appeared in the drawing-room at the Old Parsonage and gave her such deep feelings of peace and contentment. She wondered: had the Lucy Light part of her gone for ever? the part that was different. . . . And what about Dickory? Would she never see him again? . . .

She turned away from the hedge, and as she did so a flash passed through her mind, sped by the thought of Dickory. That might be why, perhaps, she had seen nothing—Dickory was no longer there. He had haunted Ember Lane because he had been unable to escape from the crime he had committed at Loats Farm. He had shot his master, on the false assumption that he made his mistress unhappy, and had lived for weeks or months or years (she could not tell how long) as a frightened, unhappy outlaw, stealing purses from travellers on the marsh, with no one to befriend him but a girl who herself was to be hanged. In the end he had been betrayed by the same "liddle Missus" for whose sake he had committed his crime.

But she had prevented him committing that crime. By some power of which she was ignorant and by some process she could not determine, she had found herself with him right at the start and had been able to stop the sequence beginning. Dickory had not shot Mus' Rowfold—for she did not believe that once prevented by such an episode (and who knew but that her later pleadings both to him and to Harry Cobsale might not have been in it too) he would ever have reformed his intention. He would have been too scared—for that day she had certainly frightened him more than he had ever frightened her. He would possibly have run away from Loats or found another job with a better master. Most likely he had married

and begotten children, brought up a family and died peacefully in his bed. His sad story had unwound like a skein of wool when cut loose from the bobbin to which it had been attached. So why should he haunt Ember Lane? Or call her to him in the Old Country?

And yet these things had happened. Others besides herself had seen the ghost. Once again she put her hand to her forehead. Gosh! all this made her feel giddy. It couldn't have happened like this. She must have dreamed it all. And yet Harry Cobsale had not shot his brother. The evil that she feared had passed from Loats. Harry Cobsale—she had heard from Joan—was going away to start a new life in a new place. . . . So was there the connection she had always thought? Or was it all coincidence? . . .

She could not tell. And she really could not think any more about it now. She must wait until her head was stronger.

For three weeks Harry Cobsale had been wanting to meet Lucinda Light. But he had not done so, partly because she had been ill, and partly because on the two occasions she had visited Joan he had been out—and Joan, of course, had never said a word. Joan was now the model of all that Richard wanted her to be; and Harry did not care a damn.

He had vaguely made up his mind to go to see Lucinda before she went off to town for her mother's wedding, but had shrunk from the idea of calling at the house. So as he walked down from the village that January morning, he was particularly glad to see her turn into Harbolets Shaw just ahead of him. He hailed her at once.

"Good morning!"

She turned and smiled.

"Good morning."

"How are you now?"

"Quite well, thank you. Quite recovered."

"I'm glad. You'd given yourself a terrible knock." He waited a moment, then said: "I can't think how you didn't see that door."

To his surprise, she coloured.

"I wasn't looking where I was going."

"That's plain—you ran into it twice."

She blushed still deeper. It made him think of something he had never seen—sunset on a field of snow.

"Oh, never mind about that now," she said. "I'm sometimes very absent-minded. How are you getting on? I hear you're leaving Loats."

"Did Joan tell you that?"

"Yes. She said you're selling your hop-quota and going to buy a new place for yourself."

"Did she seem pleased about it?"

Lucinda hesitated. He saw that she did not want to hurt his feelings.

"Of course she's pleased," he said heartily. "It was she who told me to clear out."

"Well, I suppose she'd rather have her husband to herself . . . and if you weren't there probably your mother and Daisy wouldn't feel so set against him."

"That's it. That's what she said to me. But I don't think I'd be going if it hadn't been for what *you* said. You said it better."

"I didn't say much. I can't remember now what it was."

He grinned.

"Nor can I—exactly. But I remember the way you said it. And I remember the way Joan said her piece. She turned on me like a regular little madam—threw my Christmas present out on the dung-hill."

"I thought perhaps she mightn't like to—to accept it from you."

"Oh, she accepted it all right. It was only when that—but never mind. You were right there. She loves him."

"Yes, I know she does."

"I still don't see that there was any need to be so ungrateful. . . . However, I'm shut of her now. She told me she wanted me to go, and I'm going."

"Have you decided where to go?"

He had been wanting her to ask him this.

"Pretty nearly. I've heard of a farm over by Warningore—a hundred and sixty acres, about a third of it arable, the rest woodland

and grass; there's a good house too. It's called Inchreed and it's about eight miles beyond Potcommon, so I'll still be in the same country. I thought I'd go over next week and see it." He looked at her and stammered a little as he asked the question that had that very instant shot into his mind: "Like to come with me?"

She did not look angry, but she shook her head.

"I'm afraid I couldn't. Next week I shall be in France."

He stared at her, his heart sinking.

"But I thought . . . aren't you coming back here after your mother's wedding? I'd heard you were going to live with the Malpases."

"Oh, no. I shall go to them next summer for the holidays, but directly after the wedding I'm going to school in France."

They had come to the further gate of the shaw, and she evidently thought that he was going to open it for her to pass through; but instead he turned round and leaned his back against it, looking at her as she stood before him. How odd it was, he thought, that with her fair hair her eyes were not blue, but a curious, shaded brown, with specks in them.

"You aren't in a hurry, are you?" he asked.

"No. I was only going to say good-bye to Joan."

"She can wait, I reckon. I want you to tell me more about this—this school. Surely you don't want to go to school at your age?"

She smiled again.

"I'm only just eighteen. It's a finishing school, and girls often stay at those till they're nineteen or over."

"Do they, indeed?"

He felt surprised and a little discouraged. Her going to school like this made her somehow more remote from him—not only in age, though it seemed to make her younger, but in class. The girls he knew—his sisters and others like them—left school at sixteen or even earlier. He had never heard of a girl going to school after she was grown up. Perhaps girls in Lucinda's class grew up more slowly than the girls in his; and that was why no doubt he had thought her queer—different—childish. . . . He did not like being made to think in this way of the differences between them.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry you're going away."

"I shall come back in the summer. Mrs. Malpas is very kindly having me for the summer holidays."

"That's a long time to wait. I'd thought that perhaps we might—I hope you don't think me bold or presuming, but I'd had an idea that one day you and me might be dancing together at a hotel."

"A hotel! Where?"

She looked surprised, almost bewildered.

"It was what you told me about the dance you went to on Christmas night," he said hastily. "It put the idea into my head. You said you'd taken that kid Humfrey Malpas to make a fourth, and I thought you might just as well have taken me. I mean—don't get me wrong—you probably would have taken me instead of him if I'd been a different sort of chap from what I was."

"Oh, please don't think . . ." she began. Then: "I didn't know you cared about dances."

"No—how should you know? And I don't know that I do, unless they're something very special. I went to the Marsh Harriers' Ball the year before last, but I haven't been anywhere since, because I don't know the right sort of girl. I've been making rather a stink round here, I'm afraid. Otherwise I might get more invitations. After all, you're my sister-in-law's best friend, so if you'd really known me—I mean if I'd been fit for you to know—you'd most likely have asked me instead of that kid."

"Yes, most likely we should . . . I mean we should if we'd known you better."

She still looked bewildered. She probably had no idea what was going on in his mind. How should she? She was inexperienced—not like most girls of eighteen, who would have tumbled on to something more than his meaning long ago.

"Well, perhaps we'll be able to dance together in the summer. Most of the hotels in Marlingate have dances in August."

Why was he so set on dancing with her? It was not the fairy vision that drew him now so much as the thought that such a dance would set the seal on his escape from hell.

"I should like to very much," she said, "if—if it can be managed."

"I expect it can. Mrs. Malpas could come too, if you liked. Or Humfrey could bring one of his sisters."

No doubt, he thought, Mrs. Malpas would disapprove of the whole thing. She knew him only as he was rumoured in Woodhorn. For the first time he felt glad that he now had six months in which to make another reputation.

"I'll be in my own place by then," he said. "I could drive over and fetch you in my car. Mark you—what I want you to understand is this: I shan't be the same then as I am now."

She smiled suddenly.

"I hope you won't be very different."

He was surprised to hear her say that and to see her smile as she said it. She was brighter than he had thought.

"I'll be a lot different," he said firmly, "but you'll have to like me, because it's you that'll have made the difference."

"I? How could I?"

He grinned.

"Mostly by showing me that Joan isn't the only high-class girl in Woodhorn. You don't mind my saying that, do you?"

"No, of course not."

"Some people might think I was getting fresh; but I don't mean it that way at all. It's only that weeks ago—on Boxing Day, when we were walking together across the marsh—I promised myself that one day I would dance with you. Do you remember that walk?"

She looked suddenly grave.

"Of course I do. I shall never forget it. I was so horribly scared."

"Yes—so scared that you scared me. Thank goodness that you did or I might have done something silly. Do you know that if it hadn't been for you I might now be hiding somewhere—dodging the police for my life—instead of hoping to dance with you some day? I see now that I wasn't so very far from murdering Richard."

"That—that was what made me so afraid."

"But how did you know? I didn't know it myself—not then."

She shook her head.

"I can't tell you. Don't let's talk of these things. I'd rather talk about next summer. If we can make up a party and go to a dance I shall love it above all things. It will be something to look forward to when I'm in Paris."

"It's a date, then. Or rather, it isn't a date. We won't fix anything yet. If you should come back and not find the man I'm talking about . . . well, he ain't there, that's all, and you can forget him."

He suddenly turned away from her, and opened the gate for her to pass through. As they crossed the open field, their shadows, crisp in the sunshine of the winter's noon, seemed to dance together as they moved ahead.